

No 37

5 cents.

# WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY** EVERY WEEK.

**VOLUNTEER FRED;**  
OR, FROM FIREMAN TO CHIEF. *By ROBERT LENNOX.*



"Come on, now! You see how easy it is!" cheered Volunteer Fred, but his heart thumped suffocatingly. If he lost these brave little fellows he would feel like a murderer. "And I'll die sooner than leave their mother there!" he quivered.



# WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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## VOLUNTEER FRED

OR,

## FROM FIREMAN TO CHIEF

By ROBERT LENNOX

### CHAPTER I.

"BOY FIREMEN? NOT FOR THIS VILLAGE!"

Usually the semi-monthly meetings of the Wakefield Village Board of Trustees were dull enough affairs.

Month in and month out the prosy, dull old village fathers were permitted to hold their session in quiet and peace, and no one else attended who did not have to.

But to-night it was different.

As many of the townspeople as could crowd into the little meeting room were there.

At times the discussion waxed hot indeed.

There was most unusual business on to-night.

An extraordinary thing had happened.

The local fire department, being short of men, it was proposed to authorize the swearing in of six boys as regular members of the local volunteer fire department.

Had it been proposed to put a mortgage on the village green or to let out the soldiers' monument for advertising purposes, a greater amount of discussion could not have been provoked.

Yet the boys had their friends. The boys themselves were on hand, too, although only the six who had been proposed for the fire department had been allowed in the hall.

The discussion had been on for more than half an hour.

Outside, two hundred other boys waited, prepared to cheer or hoot the trustees, according as the decision should be made.

The solitary business street of the town was well thronged, too, by people who had come out to learn the decision.

So far as known, the Board stood two for the admission of the boys, and two against it.

No one knew just how Asa Holden, President of the Board stood.

His would probably be the deciding vote.

"Boy firemen? Not for this village!" exclaimed Trustee Burt. "Boys are too flighty, and too full of larks."

"But we have to make some move," argued Trustee Hicks. "The underwriters have notified us that we must provide a better fire department, or that insurance rates will be greatly increased. You can all understand what indignation there will be from our business men and property-owners, if the insurance rates bound up all through Wakefield. Why, even a twenty per cent. increase would cost this village a few thousand dollars a year."

"If I may speak, gentlemen——" began George Byron, the assistant fire chief of the village.

"Yes," responded President Holden, "let us hear what you have to say."

"If the Board," went on Holden, "will allow us a few days longer I think we can safely promise to recruit up the full strength of the fire department with grown men. You know, we have twenty-two men now, and are only six men shy."

"Then you think grown men are decidedly better as members of the fire department?" asked President Holden.



"There ain't any doubt about it!" warmly cried the assistant chief, who was a big, broad-shouldered, lithe, dark and rather handsome fellow of twenty-eight.

"We'll hear your views right through, if you please, Mr. Byron," requested the President.

Byron went on at length, and with heat.

The gist of his remarks was to the effect that boys are not as strong as men, cannot endure as much, have not their courage developed to the same pitch, and are altogether lacking the full development of the qualities that bring out grit, power and judgment in men.

While the assistant chief was speaking—and, to tell the truth, he was scoring against the boys heavily—the other lads present looked at their leader, Fred Hope.

Fred was one of the acknowledged leaders of boydom in Wakefield.

He was seventeen, rather tall, slender, wiry, an all-around good amateur athlete.

He stood as erectly as a soldier. His fine face could be serious and full of purpose; or it could be full of mischief and frolic, as the business in hand required.

His face was usually even in its aspect; his eyes were quiet and good-humored.

But there were those who had seen him angry when there was need to be, and at such times, as some people expressed it, "Fred Hope was a terror."

Just now he had the look of being quietly but wholly in earnest.

Fred, in fact, had set his heart on joining the local fire department.

He was wholly in earnest about taking his comrades in with him.

Without these comrades in the fire department, too, there would be little pleasure in joining.

Fred's brow did not darken, nor did any sneer come to his face as he listened to George Byron's scorching arraignment of the idea of having boys serve as firemen.

"He's entitled to his opinion, of course," Fred whispered, to his closest chum, Tom Darrell.

"I hope somebody puts in some good licks for us to offset this," whispered back Tom.

"Silence among the spectators," ordered President Holden, rapping sharply with his gavel.

Both boys reddened a trifle under the rebuke.

Fred was alone in the world, save for his mother.

Together they carried a news and candy store that did fairly well.

They eked out a living, at any rate, and a fairly decent one.

Fred had gone two years to the high school, but had been compelled to leave at last, as his mother needed him in the store.

Tom Darrell was the son of the druggist.

As for the other four boys who were proposed for the fire crew, perhaps it will be best to mention Phin Holmes first of all.

Phin was another leader among the boys.

Undoubtedly he owed much of his prominence to the fact that, his father being a retired broker, and wealthy, Phin had the means to buy many of the things that boys crave, especially in their sports.

Phin, having been able to supply foot balls, and even uniforms for a baseball nine or a football eleven, had naturally come to have a considerable place in the local councils of boydom.

Phin was generally pleasant, and it was easy enough to get on with him if he was stroked the right way.

He was as darkly handsome as Tom was fair.

Billy Gray was known as a bungler. He was born so, the village folks declared. He could not seem to help bungling things at times, but his great strength won him a place among the boys of Wakefield.

There was Mike Flynn, generally called "Mickey."

He was comical and good-natured as any Irish lad that ever lived.

"Mickey," though not usually quarrelsome, could always be counted upon to fight if he was asked to by a boy big enough.

That was one strong point about Mickey's fighting—he always wanted a fellow much more than his own size.

"An oi'm goin' t'kape on foightin' chaps biggern' meself," he declared. "Constant practice is the only way Oi can ever learn t'lick a bigger man than meself."

Dave Freeman was not very tall, but he made that up in breadth of shoulders.

Though a young athlete, and not a poor one, he was rather slow, on the whole, both in mind and body.

Yet he was so thoroughly good and so solidly honest that there wasn't a fellow in town who was more quickly trusted.

George Byron ceased speaking at last.

"Now that we've had a long address from the opposition, Mr. President," suggested Trustee Hicks, "might it not be well to hear what the boys have to say for themselves? It would seem to be only fair play."

"Very good," nodded President Holden, looking at the little group of youngsters, toward whom all eyes now were turned. "Have any of the young men anything they would like to say in their own behalf?"

There was a pause.

Fred was looking straight at the trustees, but he did not speak.

"Hope," went on the President, "I think we all recognize you as the natural leader of your squad."

Phin's eyes flashed a little at this.

"Have you anything that you wish to say, Hope?"

"Perhaps, sir," came Fred's voice, cool and clear. "That is, sir, after all the men who have anything to say are through."

This was so modest that a little ripple of applause started among the grown-ups at the back of the room.

Certainly it was a response that made in favor of the boys at this critical time.

President Holden nodded his approval, then, glancing around the room, he went on:



"It seems to me that there is certainly one, yet, from whom the Board should hear, and he is present. I refer to Fire Chief John Watson. Chief, have you anything to say, or do you endorse what your assistant has said."

"I'm sorry to say that I don't approve of what Byron has said," declared the fire chief, slowly.

Byron's eyes flashed in the direction of his superior, but President Holden replied:

"Chief, we shall be very glad to hear what your views are."

Every eye now turned upon the well-known chief of the Wakefield fire department.

Honest old John Watson, though a heavy and solid man in action, was no speechmaker.

Moreover, he had a dread of public speaking.

But now the chief felt as if the occasion ran very close to the lines of duty.

So, clearing his throat, while he turned very red, he began, in a roaring voice, as though he were bellowing through a trumpet at a fire:

"Mr. President, and gentlemen of the Village Board of Trustees, I'm in favor of enlisting these youths in the fire department—wholly in favor. I'll tell you why."

Clearing his throat, and all but overcome by the embarrassment of seeing so many eyes turned upon him, the chief went on:

"I'll tell you why, gentlemen. In the first place, do you understand why our fire department has fallen into such bad shape? I'll tell you. It's because the men of this village who ought to be in the fire department have other things that they'd rather do.

"Some go down to the Alpha Club and play cards and drink.

"Others hang out around the hotel bar.

"A whole lot of our men, between twenty and thirty think that a pool-room is the only place to hang out of an evening.

"There are men in this town who'd rather go to a dance than perform a public duty.

"Some of our best young men belong to the militia company over at Dakin. I haven't a word to say against them. It's a public duty to serve in the militia, and a man can't be a State soldier and a local fireman at the same time.

"But there are scores of men in this town who'd rather court girls than show the girls how a house and a neighborhood ought to be taken care of.

"But after all, Mr. President and gentlemen, the main trouble with the men of this town who ought to be in the fire department is that they'd rather drink liquor, play cards or pool, or some other foolishness than perform public duty."

Several of the men in the audience began to squirm.

They felt that they were being rapped, and that everyone else knew it.

But Chief John Watson, when he had anything on his mind, had a hard and fearless way of hitting straight out.

"Now, Mr. President, and gentlemen of the Board," he

thundered on, "just take a look at the kind of material that's offered in these lads. Not one of 'em drinks. Not one of 'em gambles. Not one of 'em stays up late at night unless he's got some real business that keeps him up."

"Most of the men you'd want to put in the fire department are pasty-faced, played-out and got rum-soaked breaths.

"Look at these lads! All good boys, of good habits. We know 'em all. We know, too, that they're baseball boys, football boys—boys that can sprint or run hard, boys that can stand the strains that come upon athletes.

"More'n that, Mr. President and gentlemen, when it was given out that the fire department was shy, Fred Hope comes right forward and says he can raise enough of the right kind of boys to fill up the vacancies.

"Now, Mr. President and gentlemen, in concluding my few remarks, I want to say, right here, that I'd rather have these six strong-limbed, well-grown, gritty, healthy and clean-minded chaps than any twenty of the poor trash of grown young men that you find hanging round on Main Street at night.

"Finally, if I've done any good while I've been chief, I ask you to vote to let me enlist these very same six boys as firemen of Wakefield!"

There was tremendous cheering now. It came from the friends of the boys, and spread to the crowds outside.

Chief Watson's hot shot had left the opposition too much ashamed to make any further objections.

Rap, rap, rap! went Asa Holden's gavel at last.

Then the din stilled down.

"Gentlemen of the Board," asked Mr. Holden, "are you ready to vote on this matter now?"

They signified that they were.

In another minute there was more tremendous cheering.

For President Holden had cast the deciding vote.

It had been determined to admit the boys into the fire department.

"And I'll take their signatures right now, and swear 'em in," bellowed Chief Watson, his big, honest face aglow with pleasure.

He was shaking Fred Hope's hand, and without letting go of that member, drew Fred through the crowd to a side table.

Here the chief laid down the book containing the roll of the department.

Then, in an impressive voice the chief swore them in.

"Humph! A fine lot they'll prove!" grunted George Byron, disgustedly, to one of his cronies.

Clang! Ding!

The alarm sounded at this instant, on the bell in the cupola on the fire department building, which was next door to the Village Hall.

Their first alarm.

"Follow me! Punch the fellows up!" broke from Fred, almost in a whisper, as he turned to Tom Darrell.

The other fellows were close at hand, and all of them



nearer the door than the other members of the fire department.

With a rush and a football flying wedge on a small scale, Fred and his boy friends cleared a path through the good-natured, jostled crowd.

"Hey, you, Jack Burke!" called Fred, as he and his chums burst through the entrance into the street.

Jack Burke was close at hand, with two large paper-wrapped parcels.

Fred Hope caught hold of one package, breaking the string and scattering the paper.

Tom Darrell did the same with the other parcel.

Each contained three brand-new fire helmets, and these were passed around and donned like a flash.

At sight of the boys responding so quickly the crowd gave another cheer.

"Three to each machine—in place quick," ordered Fred.

He was not trying to take command of the fire department, but he was almost crazily eager that the people should see how quickly boy firemen could respond to an alarm.

The six boys were in place, three at the hand engine, and three on the ropes of the truck, by the time that Byron and the first of the grown-up firemen dashed into the fire-house.

A moment later Chief Watson bellowed out, from the pole of the hand engine:

"All your men in place, Byron?"

"Yes, chief!"

"Swing out, then, Halsey and Davis Streets! Streak it!"

Out rolled the hand engine, going as fast as the willing, bounding, eager muscles of men and boys could make it. After it rattled the truck.

The whole start had taken barely thirty-five seconds from the first peal of the bell.

"Three cheers for Hope and his boy firemen!" bawled Trustee Hicks, from one of the windows on the second story of the next building.

"Three cheers for the boys!"

And the crowd gave them, with a will, as it started to run after the reorganized fire department to the scene of the blaze.

## CHAPTER II.

### FRED MAKES GOOD RIGHT QUICK.

Long before the fire department reached the scene, those running with the apparatus could see that they were up against one of the fires of the year.

Halsey and Davis Streets was right in back of the largest hotel in Wakefield.

At Halsey and Davis Streets were three buildings taller than those generally in the town.

They were occupied as flat-houses, and in them dwelt a number of families in moderate circumstances.

"Its going to be a hot one," muttered Fred to himself, as he ran. "I wonder if we can do any real good?"

Around the corner at last dashed the firemen, into the red glow.

One flat-house was almost wholly in flames.

The one adjoining was seriously threatened.

"We can't save the Gillett!" roared Chief Watson, the instant that he took in the situation. "But we must stop the flames getting at the Royalton."

One of the firemen, wrench in hand, ran straight to the hydrant, turning on the water.

In the same twinkling others made the coupling.

And now the men were in place at the bars, ready to pump at the word.

"Swing off that longest ladder lively!" snapped out George Byron.

He and his men speedily had it up against the front of the Gillett apartment house.

Two women and a boy were at one of the windows on the floor next to the top.

Around them poured the smoke, lit up by the still distant flames.

"Be quick!" screamed one of the women.

"Coming!" George answered.

He was proud of his ladder work.

He ran up now as nimbly as an ape goes up a tree.

Behind him, on the ladder, trailed three more men.

The boy, more daring than the women, had dropped a few feet and caught at the ladder.

Now, the boy ran nimbly down, George passing him on to the men below.

"Crawl over the sill," Byron shouted to one of the women. "Don't be afraid; I'm here to catch you. Now, be quick! Drop!"

Plump! The woman was in his arms, and a cheer went up as George Byron handed the woman on down the ladder.

Then the other, after a fearful pause, dropped too.

"Get down for your lives!" bellowed Byron, choking and gasping.

For the smoke had become denser, and the flames were licking out of the front of the building now, threatening to consume the ladder.

Just in time the firemen reached the ground, and drew their ladder away.

It had begun to burn.

"Here, you boys!" roared Watson. "Take axes and run up through the Royalton to the roof. You, Hope, take a rope with you. We'll run the hose up along the ladder as far as we can go. You let down a rope and so draw the hose up to the roof. Quick, now!"

The order was bellowed through the trumpet.

Nor did Fred and the other boy firemen linger an instant.

Fred caught up a coil of rope, snatched an axe down from the truck, and made a bolt for the entrance to the Royalton.

He was followed so quickly by the other youngsters that they all but wedged in the doorway.

A moment later they were on the roof.

Below, George Byron had just got the long ladder placed, and was running up it with the nozzle of the hose.



"Help us! In mercy's name, help us quickly!"

The agonized appeal came from the roof of the blazing Gillett.

A woman and her two young boys stood on the roof, close to the brink of the chasm that yawned between the two apartment houses.

The space between the two buildings was at least fifteen feet.

Even as Fred looked he saw the flames break out close under the roof.

The smoke was pouring out in thick clouds.

A delay of five minutes, and, between smoke and heat, the woman and her sons must surely perish.

"Tend to that rope and the hose, Tom," shouted Fred, tossing the coil to his chum. "Dave, shout down and beg the chief to send up long boards, if he can. No; don't either. The flames would lick up the boards. We must do quicker work."

"Can't you save us?" shrieked the woman, in a tone of agony.

She was thinking of her children, not of herself.

"Yes!" vibrated Fred Hope, cheerily, through the heat, flame and smoke. "Look out for an instant; then keep your nerve and follow orders."

Over on the roof of the Gascoyne House several people stood watching the progress of events.

"Save that woman and her children!" bawled one man, hoarsely, without, however, offering any advice as to how it was to be done.

Fred did not even stop to answer.

His quick eye had noted the only possible means of escape.

It was a desperate chance, but better than nothing.

On the roof of the Royalton stood a tall flag-pole.

Crash! Fred struck his axe, briskly, hard into the wood, cutting up, then down.

Again and again he struck, chopping in desperation, for he realized how time pressed.

As he chopped, he kept an eye on the course of the pole.

"Look out!" he bellowed, a few minutes later.

The pole swayed, toppled, and lay a bridge across the chasm between the two roofs.

"Now's where the nerve comes in!" bellowed Fred between his hands. "Madam, let your elder son, the one in the red shirt, lie down and get a good hold, with hands and feet, on the pole. Let the little fellow get on the larger boy's back and hold on for all he's worth."

"Oh! They'll be killed!" screamed the mother.

"I believe they can make it," Fred Hope shouted back.

"At all events, it's better than staying where you are and being roasted up. Hurry! It's your last, best chance."

The elder of the two boys settled the matter for himself.

Lying down, close to the edge of the hot roof, he called to his little brother to sit across his back and hold on around his neck.

As one too paralyzed to think the smaller boy obeyed.

Then the plucky little fellow at the pole began his course over the chasm.

For the first few feet he made his way grittily, though the strain on his young arms was intense.

The smaller fellow seemed dazed, but he did not forget to hold on for all he was worth.

"I hope I can make it!" gritted the larger boy, halting to ease his aching muscles.

He looked almost despairingly ahead.

"Come on, now! You see how easy it is!" cheered Volunteer Fred, but his heart thumped suffocatingly.

If he lost these brave little fellows he would feel like a murderer.

"And I'll die sooner than leave their mother!" he quivered.

There was a creaking as if the pole would snap.

Fred felt his heart stand still. He steadied the pole so it would not roll.

But the brave little fellow who was doing all the work out there in mid-air came pluckily along.

Fred, leaning far over the edge of the roof, caught hold of the little fellow and helped him up to safe footing.

At the same time the littler fellow was put down on his feet.

Instantly he turned around, piping anxiously:

"Mama, come quick!"

"Shall I try it?" cried the woman.

Fred's comrades, having got the hose to the roof, and waiting for Byron and others to run up through the house, now turned to look at our hero.

"I don't know that the pole's safe," cried Fred. "I thought I heard it crack when the boys came over. Wait! I'll find out in a jiffy!"

Ere any one could guess his purpose Fred Hope had leaned over the edge of the roof, just as George Byron came on to the roof.

"What's that crazy youngster doing?" he demanded, as he came up.

"Can't you see?" retorted Tom Darrell.

For Fred was now out in mid-air, swinging along, hanging to the pole and moving hand after hand.

The pole creaked fearfully.

Two or three times Fred, with a sudden stilling of the heart, fancied that the pole was about to give and dash him to death below.

But at last he was close enough to the roof of the Gillett to make a swoop forward with his hands, grasping at the coping.

An instant more and he had drawn himself up beside the terrified woman.

"That pole isn't safe," Fred assured her, his voice steady though his face was white. "We'll have to find some other way to get you across."

"What are you doing over there, you young idiot?" glared George Byron.

"If one of you'll throw me a rope," Fred retorted, "I'll show you what I want to do."



Tom Darrell, without waiting for orders, threw the rope that had been used to haul up the hose.

Byron gave the nozzle into the hands of two men who had followed him up.

Then he ran to the edge of the roof, bawling down through his trumpet:

"Play away, Volunteer One!"

Next he ran over to the edge of the roof to stare at Fred Hope.

That youngster, having the rope for which he had asked, now raced back to an iron stanchion that he had espied.

Swiftly as hands and mind could work, he made the rope fast.

Then he ran back to the white-faced mother.

"Can you be strong for an instant?" he demanded, tensely.

"I can try to," answered the woman in a subdued voice.

"Double your arm—hard I want to feel it."

She obeyed. Fred believed that she had muscle enough to aid him in the desperate feat which alone could save them.

He sized her up swiftly, judging her weight.

"I'll do it unless it pulls my arms out of their sockets!" he gritted.

Then, to the woman, he added, sternly:

"Watch what I am going to do, and obey my orders. If you do, and keep your head, I'll take you safely to your children."

He sat down at the edge of the roof, his legs hanging over.

Reaching forward he caught the rope with both hands.

"Now, reach out," he commanded. "Get your hands clasped tightly around my neck. Hurry, for the rope may get afire!"

Like one in a trance the woman obeyed him.

Fred felt her arms around his neck in a despairing clutch.

"All fast?" he breathed.

"Yes."

"Hold on—tight! Now!"

"The little fool!" groaned George Byron, as he watched Fred, fascinated. "He'll hurl the woman and himself to destruction!"

Fred was crossing the chasm, now, slowly, deliberately.

He felt, indeed, as if his arms would be torn from their sockets.

But the woman aided him by holding on tightly around his neck and making no struggle or outcry.

Slowly, an inch at a time it seemed to the thrilled, throbbing spectators on the other roof, Fred made his way across.

At length he was close enough for Byron and others, lying flat, to reach out their arms.

"The woman! Never mind me!" panted Fred Hope.

They got her, and raised her, almost swooning.

Fred felt a great surge of relief just as her weight was taken from him.

He heard the frantic cheering from the thrilled spectators down in the street, but the noise seemed a mile away.

"Catch him quick! He's going!" panted Tom Darrell, reaching out on one side for his chum.

Dave Freeman got an arm on the other side.

Together they drew him up to safety.

Then, for an instant, Fred Hope seemed to collapse.

But in another instant he was on his feet, even if somewhat wobbly.

"That was a slick act, Hope," grunted George Byron.

"Just what any boy fireman with muscle ought to be able to do," retorted Fred, coolly.

The woman and her sons were led to the roof pent-house door and shown the way downstairs to the street.

But Fred was already looking about with an eye to his duties.

There was not much that could be done, as yet.

The nozzle-men were drenching the roof and the wall of the Royalton that was nearest to the blazing Gillett apartment house.

Unless the Royalton actually caught, there was little else that the firemen up here on the roof could do.

"All spectators get back!" roared Chief Watson, in the street. "The Gillett may come crashing down at any moment."

Firemen and police drove the crowd back.

Meanwhile, the fire-fighters up on the roof of the Royalton felt as if soon the heat from the blazing pile must drive them back.

The intense heat was already blistering their hands and faces.

But just then came a lull in the blaze.

Then, suddenly, a current of air caught the flames and drove them away from the Royalton, out over the street.

So far the wetting of the Royalton had stopped it from catching fire.

But now the change in the wind had saved the firemen themselves.

Crash! The upper part of the Gillett caved in, sending up a shower of sparks.

The roof of the Royalton was no longer in danger, but the side of the building might catch at any moment now.

Lying on the roof, Byron took the nozzle, playing down and wetting the wall until a man arrived with a coil of rope for lowering the hose to the streets.

"And the chief orders all men down now!" added the messenger.

The hose was lowered. Then Byron led his men down to the street.

"There's Fred Hope!" shouted someone in the pushed-back crowd. "Three rousing cheers for the fellow who made good at his first fire!"

"Stop that shouting!" bellowed Chief Watson, through his trumpet. "This isn't a picnic. My men must be able to hear their orders."

So the cheering subsided.



Fred and his friends, in the meantime, had been ordered back to the bars of the hand engine.

They were pumping, now, as sturdily as they had done other work aloft.

There was another crash, as more of the Gillett's frame came down.

The wall of the Royalton was now so well wetted that attention was turned to playing on the blazing ruins.

A third crash, as more of the doomed building came down.

Then three men sprang through the crowd, bearing Chief Watson.

That doughty old veteran had been caught unawares.

"Don't stop to look!" roared George Byron. "Every man and boy to his duty."

Axemen and pikemen were now fighting forward in the ruins, trying to pull blazing rafters apart.

The Gillett was down, now, and the Royalton saved.

The worst of the fire was over.

About all that remained to be done was to play a steady stream of water over the glowing heaps of embers that littered the late site of the apartment house.

Now the crowd surged through the street again.

Hundreds pressed forward, eager for a sight of Fred Hope.

One of the first was President Holden, of the Board of Trustees.

"Hope," uttered the President, grasping our hero's hand, "I'm proud of my vote to-night. I'm satisfied as to what boy firemen can do. If there are more like you in town, I wouldn't be afraid of a fire department made up wholly of boys!"

"Keep at your work, Hope!" growled George Byron. "No time for heroics."

Then the assistant chief grumbled to himself:

"Watson is laid up for many a day. I'm fire chief now. We'll see what can be done to squelch this forward youngster!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE BRAVE GET THE FAIR.

"Mr. Byron, here are some people who have a right to see Fred Hope. I think you can safely excuse him now."

So spoke Mr. Holden.

The acting chief, who did not dare offend the President of the Village Board of Trustees, scowled as he replied: "All right. Fall out, Hope!"

Fred stepped away from his place at the hand engine, as Mr. Holden took him by the arm and led him away.

The woman whom our hero had rescued, a Mrs. Thorpe, was hurrying forward, accompanied by her husband and sons.

"Hope," exclaimed Mr. Thorpe, huskily, "I don't know how I'm going to thank you, or how my family are, either."

"There's no need to," smiled Fred.

"No need?" echoed Mr. Thorpe. "What on earth are you saying, lad?"

"Why, that's what firemen are for—to save life and property," laughed young Hope, easily.

"But it was magnificent work, just the same, from what I hear of it."

"There are twenty-eight men and boys in the company who could and would do the same thing," contended Fred, carelessly.

"I don't believe it."

"Mr. Thorpe, saying that would be to give our fire department a black eye."

"I don't care what you say, Hope, it's to you that my gratitude must and does go out. In the morning I shall be able to give you a feeble sign of what I think of your heroism."

"Heroism is a word that is abolished in every fire department," laughed Fred, lightly.

"It can't be banished from my mind, anyway," retorted Mr. Thorpe. "In the morning——"

"See here, sir, if you're thinking about any reward, any present or testimonial——"

"Why not?" demanded Thorpe.

"I can tell you right now," rejoined Fred, quietly, "that you're after the wrong fellow. I was enrolled to-night as a member of the volunteer fire department. Now, a volunteer is, or ought to be, one who puts in everything for the good of the cause. So, if you endeavor to give me any reward of any kind, I'll simply hand it back. I'm glad it came my way to help your dear ones to-night, Mr. Thorpe. If it ever comes your way, you'll do as much for me—I know you will. Shake on it!"

Laughing, Fred held out his hand, which Mr. Thorpe clasped.

Then our hero offered his hand to Mrs. Thorpe, after which the young fireman seized the hands of both the young Thorpes in his own two hands.

"I want to tell you that you're two of the pluckiest little fellows I know," smiled Fred, warmly. "If it hadn't been for your grit, boys, you wouldn't be alive now. Thank you for helping me out."

With that Fred turned and hurried back to his post.

He was followed by a murmur that grew to a cheer.

Hearing it, Acting Chief Byron scowled again.

"That's the worst of having boys in the department," he told himself. "First thing we know the folks will be wanting to raise a Heroes' Monument to the boys in this department. Now, that I've got full swing, I'll see what can be done to work these youngsters out."

In a very short time afterwards Byron sounded the recall.

Tired and hot with their hard, brisk work of this early September night, the two crews of Volunteer One fell into their places and dragged engine and truck back to the fire-house.

Probably two hundred citizens followed.

After the apparatus had been housed, the members of the crews hung up their helmets on the hooks provided for that



purpose on the trucks, and resumed their ordinary head-gear.

Fred, in addition, drew on his jacket and buttoned it up, almost hiding the fireman's shirt that he had worn to the meeting of the Board earlier in the evening.

At the time of the meeting Fred had wholly concealed that shirt by wearing a handkerchief tied around his neck.

Now, he felt that he had earned the right to wear a fireman's shirt, and he was not quite so particular about concealing it.

Phin Holmes, as he stepped almost swaggeringly out of the fire-house, caught sight, across the street, of one whom he had hoped to see.

Over there, and alone, stood Nellie Thurman.

She had been at the public library when the alarm came in, and had been drawn to the scene of the blaze.

Her father's coachman, driving into town in search of her, had failed to find her.

And now Nellie was waiting, feeling quite sure that Phin would see her and escort her home.

They had been sweethearts for at least two years, though Phin was much the more ardent.

His father being a retired broker of considerable wealth, Phin had felt that he, by right, should pay attentions to Nellie, who was the daughter of Banker Thurman, one of the richest men in the county.

As for Nellie, she had found Phin good-looking, sweet-tempered usually in her presence, and very attractive. She rather more than liked him.

Nellie, who had just turned sixteen, was, by anyone's standard, the prettiest girl in Wakefield.

She was rather tall for a girl, lithe and slender, yet splendidly rounded.

Her black hair and dark flashing eyes, her pretty oval face, her rich complexion—all these charms made her the belle of the young set.

Yet Phin Holmes was the only youngster in town of family rich enough to aspire to one who would be a great heiress.

Phin stepped across the street to where Nellie stood, walking very erect and with a self-pride that was almost comical to see.

He lifted his hat as he neared the girl, and they exchanged greetings.

"Well, you see we got into the fire department," began Phin.

"Yes, and what a splendid chance you boys had to show your mettle at once," cried Nellie.

"Were you pleased with us?" asked Phin, his face glowing.

"Everyone certainly ought to be pleased with the work of one of your number to-night," Nellie answered, promptly and warmly.

Eh? What—who——"

"Why, Fred Hope, of course!" cried Nellie. "Wasn't he splendid? I stood just where I could see his whole performance. It was grand!"

"It was, eh?" growled Phin.

"Why, of course you know it was, Phin. You were up on the roof with him, so you must have seen it all."

"I—I wasn't paying much attention," returned Phin Holmes, sourly. "We all had our duties up there, and I was busy with mine."

"I'd like to see Fred Hope, and thank him, as one of the residents of this village," suggested Nellie.

"Oh, you would?" gasped Phin, uneasily.

He was so smitten with Nellie Thurman that he hated the idea of having any hero come up to obscure his own lustre.

"Yes," pursued Nellie. "I'd like to tell him how splendid I think his conduct was."

"Huh! Why Fred Hope ain't much of anybody," warned Phin, enviously.

"He isn't?" demanded Nellie, her eyes indignantly open.

"His mother is a newswoman and a candy-peddler. Fred is her assistant. It wouldn't do to make too much of a fellow like that."

"Will you ask Fred Hope if he'll step over and speak to me?" demanded Nellie, coldly.

"No, I won't," flared the boy.

"Thank you, Phin," returned the girl, still more frigidly. "I shall know better than to ask a courtesy from you again in the near future."

"If you think I'm going to introduce you to anyone like that fellow, you're asking too much," glowered Holmes.

"I know Mr. Hope already," replied Nellie, coolly.

"You do?"

"I've known him for some months."

"You never told me," glared Phin.

"There was no reason why I should. Good-night, Phin." That was a dismissal direct and cool.

Phin started, glared at the girl, was met by her own cold, defiant gaze, and then turned wrathily on his heel.

He even forgot to lift his hat as he stalked across the street.

"I'll just let her come out of a fit like that by herself," he raged within himself. "It doesn't do to let a girl think she owns a fellow and can say and do what she pleases to him."

Nellie, with equal coolness, turned and walked along the street in the direction of her home.

Fred Hope, in crossing a street on his way home, met her unexpectedly at a corner.

"Good evening, Miss Thurman," he greeted her, pleasantly.

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Hope. I didn't expect to meet you, but I'm glad I have. I want to tell you how splendid your——"

"Miss Thurman," Fred broke in, anxiously, "you won't think me rude if I ask you to say no more on that subject, will you."

"But——"

"Honestly, Miss Thurman, if I've got to listen to praises every time I have a chance to do my duty as a fireman, it



will drive me out of the department. Now, please don't say another word on the subject, will you?"

"Well, then, I won't," agreed the girl, reluctantly. "But——will you take my hand?"

"With the greatest happiness in the world," the young fireman assured her, and took her pretty, warm little hand in his own with a sense of a delicious thrill.

"Are you going home without an escort, Miss Thurman?" asked Fred. "Why, Phin can't know that you're here. If you'll come back with me, we can find him and——"

"Thank you. I don't wish to find Phin to-night."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

"Phin has been acting disagreeably," laughed the girl, "and is in disgrace until he does proper penance."

"If I were Phin I'd try to find out at once what the penance is," smiled Fred.

"Perhaps he won't."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure he will," Fred continued. "Phin is a good fellow all around. Once in a while he may have a little crotchet, but in the long run he means to be as good a fellow as any."

"If you don't mind, we won't discuss Phin Holmes any more," Nellie rejoined, a trifle icily.

"Well, then, we won't," agreed Fred. "But Miss Thurman, surely you're not going home alone. Will you permit me——"

"If you're offering your escort, I shall be greatly pleased with it," the girl assured him.

"I wish I could always please as easily, and as pleasantly for myself," Fred assured her gallantly, as, with some hesitation, he offered her his arm.

Nellie took it at once, resting her own soft, warm little hand on his arm with a touch that sent a thrill through the boy.

"I must keep my head about me," he murmured to himself. "I mustn't be foolish enough to imagine that I'm falling in love with a princess like Miss Thurman."

Since his own conduct at the fire, and Phin's conduct after it, were forbidden topics between them, their attempts at conversation as they strolled along might have resulted in dismal failure, had not Miss Nellie been far more at ease than was Fred Hope.

"I never see you at any of our young peoples' parties," she observed.

"I never go——where you do," Fred admitted.

"But why not?" she pressed.

"Well, for one thing, I'm not invited," Fred replied, without shame.

"Then I shall get some invitations for you," she replied, very decidedly.

"I'd rather you didn't, Miss Thurman," he said, hastily.

"Why, may I ask?"

"Miss Thurman, I'm a working boy. No one would really want me at the parties where you go."

"Why, you're one of the born leaders of the boys in Wakefield."

"Somewhat, perhaps, in sports and that sort of thing. That's one place where the working boy can hold his own."

"You could hold your own anywhere," Nellie replied, with a sweet positiveness that set the young fireman's heart a-bumping.

"But I——I don't care to go to any of the parties, Miss Thurman."

"Would you go to please me?" she insisted.

"I'd hate to say no."

"Would you go to some of the parties if I asked you to take me, and be my escort?" suggested Nellie.

Perhaps she was thinking that this would be a fine way to rebuke Phin for his snobbishness.

Nellie Thurman didn't, by any means, encourage all sorts of acquaintances, but she hated all downright snobbishness with downright American disgust.

She must have felt the young fireman's arm tremble as she rested upon it.

Would he go as her escort?

Would he enter heaven if someone held the gate open?

"But it would be only for once or twice, and then I'd be miserable when I saw her on any other fellow's arm," he groaned within himself. "I couldn't bear to look at Phin if I saw her out with him after that."

"Would you go?" she insisted, looking straight into his eyes.

"Yes," surrendered Fred, weakly, but eagerly.

"And will you call at the house soon, to meet a few of my young friends?" went on the girl.

"I believe, Miss Thurman, that I'd do anything that you asked me to," Fred answered, honestly.

And Nellie, who was thinking that a hard-working, honest, brave fellow like Fred would be all the better for a few social opportunities, resolved at once that he should have them.

"There's your home," he half sighed, as they reached the gate that opened into the driveway and footpath leading up to the fine old Thurston mansion. "You're going to let me see you to the door, aren't you?"

"I should be offended, if you didn't," she answered, slowing her step down.

So they strolled slowly, and chatted some moments before the door.

Of course she asked Fred if he wouldn't come in, but he had the good sense to thank her and to decline.

Then, after he had said good-night, and had seen the door close upon her, Fred turned and hurried desperately down the driveway.

"Fred Hope, what a fool you are!" he groaned. "You'll get in Fool's Paradise for once or twice, and then——Hullo!"

This last word was uttered aloud, for, as Fred turned out through the gateway, he encountered Phin Holmes on the sidewalk just beyond.

Phin was scowling and black-browed. Fred had never seen him look so ugly.



"Been seeing Nellie Thurman home, have you?" hissed Phin.

"Yes," smiled Fred. "With her permission, of course."

"That's got nothing to do with it," uttered Phin, savagely.

"Hasn't eh?" smiled Fred, banteringly. "Why, I thought it had everything to do with it. If she hadn't consented, I wouldn't have thought of such a thing!"

"Oh, shut up!" quivered Phin.

Fred opened his eyes very wide.

"What ails you, Phin?"

"I'm going to show you!" raged the other lad, hauling off his coat and dropping it on the ground.

"What——"

"Shut up——and put up your hands!"

Phin was dancing about, doing some remarkable foot-work, for Fred, the instant that it dawned on him that a fight couldn't very well be avoided, had fallen into a surprised but excellent guard.

Biff! Phin swatted for Fred's nose, but a parry drove his arm up.

"You ought to have more sense, Phin," uttered Hope.

"Shut up!"

Swat!

Phin tried again to get in, but Fred drove him back.

Then both boys sparred in earnest.

Phin, at last, got in a slight tap on the nose that brought blood and drove Fred's dander up.

They sparred viciously now.

Biff! It was a beautiful, straight-arm left-hander that caught Phin over the left eye with such force as to knock him down flat.

All the stars in the sky seemed to come down close to that eye for a few moments.

It throbbed as if fire had struck it.

Phin had had enough, and that was no discredit to his courage, either.

That damaged eye was closed up tight, while the pain was so severe as to make him sick and dizzy.

Fred instantly let his hands fall.

"I'm sorry you were such a fool, Phin," he observed, quietly.

"Oh, we'll find out later who's the bigger fool!" sneered young Holmes. "This isn't the last of this."

"Oh, just as you please, then," retorted Fred, coolly.

"But, for your own sake, I hope you won't want to fight any more to-night. After that jolt you're not in shape."

He waited for a moment to see whether Phin had any intention of renewing the fight.

But young Holmes continued to sit on the ground, swabbing the damaged eye with a handkerchief.

"Good-night, Phin," uttered Fred. "Sorry it had to be done."

"Good-night, eh?" growled the vanquished boy under his breath. "Fred Hope, I don't believe you know as well as you will later what it means to make an enemy of me!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE TEST OF GOOD METTLE.

"Phin!"

"Shut up!"

"See here, my boy."

"Don't you talk to me like that!"

"Phin," grumbled Fred Hope, "are you going to be a chump always?"

"Who's a chump?" flared Phin.

"You're acting like one, Phin Holmes. Here, for three days, I've been trying to have a word with you."

"Wait till this eye gets straight," growled Phin. "Then you can have as many words as you like!"

The eye did not look as badly as it felt.

Druggists, or many of them, in these days, are artists with the brush and flesh paints.

They are expert, often, in painting out a black eye so that little or none of the damage shows.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening, and the scene before the little shop on Main Street that Mrs. Hope owned.

Mrs. Hope herself was seated behind the counter inside, patiently knitting.

She was a very sweet-faced woman, who had once been very pretty.

Fred, owing to dullness of business at this hour, had stepped outside for a few breaths of fresh air.

While seated there he had seen Phin coming.

As Holmes passed, head stiffly up in the air and looking straight ahead, our hero had hailed him.

"Phin," went on Fred, "we haven't met but once since—the other night. We can't always be strangers, if we're to serve in the same fire department. If we're to be brought together often——"

"How are we going to be brought together?" glared Phin.

"Why, if we're in the same fire company——"

"We won't be very long."

"Phin, you're not thinking of resigning already?"

"What? Me resign? Don't you think it!"

"Then we'll keep on being in the same company."

"No, we won't," warned Holmes, in a low tone. "Not if I'm as smart as I give myself credit for being!"

"What on earth do you mean, Phin?"

"Oh, you'll find out all right," growled the other boy.

"Then you——"

Clang! It was the first peal of the fire-alarm bell.

"A fire, mother!" called Fred, and was off like a flash.

Phin, too, bolted, trying to overtake and pass Fred Hope. But he could not. Hope was one of the best junior sprinters in the county.

"Box fourteen, Phin," called Fred, over his shoulder.

"Why, that's the box in front of Mr. Thurman's place."

The same fact had dawned upon Phin Holmes as he ran and counted.



Ahead, up the street, they saw the engine and truck sweep out of the fire-house and go clattering up the street.

Both boys put on extra spurts of speed and did their best to overtake the apparatus.

Fred caught up a full minute before Phin did.

Along the streets people were running fast.

For all had realized that there was a chance that the costliest dwelling in town was in flames.

No one wanted to miss that sight.

On account of the many trees, however, the firemen could not see the location or extent of the blaze until fairly close to the Thurman mansion.

Yes; the fire was surely there.

It was a square wooden tower, at the east end of the mansion that was in flames.

Wakefield's fire-fighters breathed more easily when they saw what kind of work was cut out for them.

The tower, which was three stories high, might burn completely, and yet the rest of the dwelling be saved if the fire-fighters worked briskly.

Moreover, there was an abundance of water, for Banker Thurman had taken the precaution to have a hydrant placed near each of the four corners of his great abode.

"Straight to the tower," bawled George Byron, the acting chief.

There the apparatus was rushed, and there it was halted.

With the precision of trained men these fire fighters got the hose coupled, the hydrant on, and a stream soaring aloft almost as soon as they halted.

Mr. Thurman and his wife and a dozen servants could be seen running about on the broad veranda beyond the tower.

"Are you all out of the house?" bawled George Byron, as the water hissed against the flames and pikemen stood by while others raised a short ladder to the second story.

It was from the second story that the flames were now bursting out fiercely.

A servant, on that second story, had dropped a kerosene lamp, which had exploded and started the blaze.

"We're all here except my daughter," called the banker, hurrying toward the acting chief. "She, I believe, is out for the evening."

"Anybody live on that second story?" asked Byron.

"No; it was a retiring room for my wife, and she's safe."

"And the third story?" asked Byron, crisply.

"That's a kind of snuggery for my daughter."

"You're sure she's not there?"

"Why, she can't be, or we'd have heard from her," replied the old man.

But at that instant, as if to undeceive him, a window in the third story of the tower shot up and a girl's white, appalled face stared down at the destruction leaping up to her.

"Help!" she cried.

"Nellie!" screamed her father.

"I was reading, and fell asleep on the sofa, papa," called the girl, in a trembling voice.

Already George Byron was roaring:

"The long ladder! Run it up! Run it up!"

A dozen pairs of hands had wrenched the ladder from the truck.

Up it went, resting just under the sill of the window where Nellie stood, white-faced and stifling.

George Byron ran to the foot of the ladder, glancing swiftly up.

But, as he did so, the flames surged out, licking the ladder and setting it afire.

Then smoke poured out so that the girl was seen to totter, and then hang over the sill as if swooning.

But her staring, horrified eyes were open.

She saw the flames below, the clouds of smoke, and she saw even further.

"Up, man, and get her, quick!" appealed Mr. Thurman, frantically, pushing his way to Byron's side.

"I'd like to, sir, but it can't be done," protested Byron. "She'd be burned up bringing her down, and so would I. We'll have to hold the net and call to her to jump."

"But she's swooning, man!"

"The jump is her only chance," cried Byron, hoarsely.

He was no coward, but he felt that the rescue by the ladder was impossible.

"Good heavens, men!" quavered the banker. "You're not going to let my child burn to death. Here, let me go up!"

Phin was at the foot of the ladder, too, staring upwards.

Mr. Thurman started to climb, but was pulled back.

Then he was roughly pushed back as a new figure appeared on the scene.

It was Fred Hope.

A gasp, partly of comprehension, went up as they saw how Fred, scaling the ladder swiftly, was provided.

Swiftly he had thrust his arms into the sleeves of a fireman's rubber coat.

Over one arm he carried a rubber blanket, of the kind that is used to protect goods in a burning building from the damage of water.

"Ah!"

It was a gasp that was half a sob as they saw Fred Hope passing through the very flames, which leaped greedily at him.

But he was through the fire zone like a flash.

He saw Nellie hanging over the sill, trying, by closing her mouth, to shut out the suffocating fumes that came up to her.

But she was compelled to breathe, and so she swallowed an amount of smoke that was surely taking her life away.

As Fred reached her and leaped upon the sill, he did not speak.

Every instant was needed for action!

Swift as thought he wrapped the rubber blanket well around the relaxing form.

Then, with the girl in his arms he sprang upon the sill, thence to the ladder.

With one arm he held her tight now, with the other hand clutching at the rungs of the ladder.

No cheer went up.



All the dazed spectators looked for the boy and his lovely burden to be caught by the flames on their descent.

Those flames were now belching out more angrily than ever, despite the stream of water poured upon them.

Fred took as deep a breath as he dared in that awful atmosphere.

Then he fairly ran down the ladder.

It was a sight well worth seeing, this feat of athletics!

And now the cheers broke forth wildly, as Mr. Thurman seized his fainting daughter in his own arms and bore her away.

Fred followed a few feet, then stopped and looked queer.

Tom Darrell sprang to his side.

"What is it, old fellow?"

"Legs burned, I guess," muttered Fred. "It isn't much of anything, though."

"Lean on me, old fellow."

Thus he limped some yards away, and then lay down on the ground, on top of the rubber blanket that had done such good work in protecting Nellie Thurman from the flames.

Fred lay for some time without attention, for the only doctor in the crowd was busy trying to revive Nellie.

But at last someone called the doctor over to Fred.

"Pretty tough burns," declared the medical man. "It may be a fortnight before you're much good, my lad."

Fred smiled up at the doctor and at Tom and Dave, for now the fire was so well under control that all except the tower could be saved.

"I got off easy, didn't I?" asked Fred.

"Well," replied the doctor, pursing his lips, "opinions might differ as to that."

The crowd stood close by, looking on, and again Fred Hope was the hero of the department.

"That kid is bound to make himself the most talked-about fellow of us all," uttered George Byron, moodily.

As soon as he knew that Nellie was conscious again, Phin hastened over to her.

She was seated on a chair on the lawn, able to breathe well again.

"You had an awfully close squeak, Nellie," he assured her.

"Fortunately the best man in the fire department was on hand," she smiled, ironically.

"Why, Nellie, I'd have come up for you, if Fred Hope hadn't been so quick," protested the boy.

"Would you, Phin?"

"Why, you can't doubt that, Nellie. I was just about to start up when Hope dashed through us all."

"He showed grand presence of mind," murmured the girl. "His presence of mind, in fact, seems to equal his splendid grit."

"Why, Nellie, it wasn't such a much of a thing that he did."

"No," murmured Nellie. "All he did was to save my life."

"But others would have done it."

"Do you know, Phin, as I looked down the length of that ladder, I didn't see anything in your face that showed any willingness to come up to me."

"Oh, Nellie!"

"I hope I was wrong."

"You are, Nellie, I assure you. But," he went on bitterly, "these days you seem bound to think that Fred Hope is superior to me in everything."

"I don't think anything about it," returned the girl, with a meaning so plain that Phin fell back cursing under his breath.

Mr. Thurman was over beside our hero.

"Hope," he said, with a good deal of emotion, "you are not to get any notion in your head that I shall forget your splendid act. I have sent for a carriage to take you home, and Dr. Emerson will attend you without expense until you are all right again. In the morning I shall drop in to see you, and then I shall endeavor at least to make some sort of reward to you for what you have done."

"If you do, I won't let you in to see me again," returned Fred, coolly. "I intend to do my duty as a fireman as long as I remain in the department. And I don't intend to accept any rewards for doing my duty."

"I trust you'll think better of that in the morning, Hope."

"And I trust you'll think better of your plan, Mr. Thurman."

"Well, well, lad, I'm going to get my daughter and bring her over here to thank you before the carriage comes."

Nellie's first smile of gratitude was all the reward Fred Hope wanted.

She took his hand and chatted with him gratefully until the carriage came.

Then Fred, the doctor and Tom Darrell went away in that vehicle, and the days had now come when Fred Hope, lying on his cot, or seated in an arm-chair, was to learn some of the costs of a fireman's heroism.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE ALARM FROM BOX TWENTY-EIGHT.

It was early in October when Dr. Emerson pronounced Fred Hope fit for duty again.

Even now Fred's legs felt a bit stiff. Still, with care he could do duty.

While he was under the physician's care Fred had not gone once to the fire house.

That was to please his mother who felt certain that, if an alarm came in, her son would respond with the others, fit or not fit.

During the time that he was laid up Nellie came every day to see him, her bright face and her laughter livening the little back room in which Fred spent his time up to the day when he could get out of doors again.

On his first walk out of doors Tom Darrell was his companion.

On his second walk Tom and Nellie shared his company.



All of the boy firemen came often, except Phin.

He did not come once to see our hero.

Mr. Thurman had called frequently, too.

On his first visit he had tried to talk Mrs. Hope over to the idea of accepting some reward for Fred's services.

"It wouldn't do, Mr. Thurman," Mrs. Hope replied, firmly. "I've always taught Fred that it isn't the right thing to take a reward for doing one's plain duty. I'm glad that he refused."

So Mr. Thurman, whose gratitude did not lessen with time, as some men's does, wondered how and what he could do to discharge his great debt of gratitude to the young fireman.

A few of the grown-ups of the fire department dropped in evenings.

George Byron came but once. He made it almost too plain that his was only a "duty call."

But now Dr. Emerson, after looking the boy well over, had said:

"Hope, I'm afraid you're really fit for duty again."

"Afraid?" laughed the boy.

"Well, I'm afraid you'll only run yourself into more danger."

"Doc, wouldn't you advise me to run into danger, if I could save human lives?"

The doctor coughed.

"I don't see how I can say 'no' to that, Hope."

Tom smiled.

"But don't run into needless danger, my boy."

"Needless danger?" echoed the young fireman. "Why, doc, I think the fellow who runs needlessly into danger, is——"

"Well?"

"Just a plain, ordinary fool, with a lop-sided brain."

"Stick to that idea, Hope, and I'll be glad to see you back on duty."

So on this evening Fred was around at the fire-house.

So were all the other youngsters, Tom and Dave walking up with our hero.

Phin saw him coming in.

Without even as much as a nod, Phin got up and stalked stiffly out.

"Now, I wonder what ails him?" flared Tom Darrell, grouchy. "I've a good mind to go after him and remove his block!"

"Don't," Fred almost ordered. "Let him alone."

Phin was sore, indeed.

He had seen but little of Nellie Thurman, of late.

But, only the day before, he had sent her a note, asking her to go under his escort to the big party at the Andersons'.

In his breast pocket, at this moment, Phin carried Nellie's note in which she regretted that she must decline his very kind invitation.

"It's all that Fred Hope," muttered Phin Holmes, angrily, as he plodded down the street. "She's crazy about

that upstart just now. But I'll show her that I don't mean to be passed by for such a—ragamuffin!"

In his anger, Phin forgot that Fred, even if he was poor, was decently poor, with fairly good clothes and the means of getting modestly through the world.

"Seems good to get back, don't it?" was Byron's gruff, rather backward greeting of the boy whose popularity he didn't like.

"Very," replied Fred, amiably.

"Well, we've just had two fires while you were laid up, Hope," observed one of the men. "One of them was in an ash can in a cellar, and the other was a two-hundred-dollar affair in a barn. You haven't missed much."

"I'd just as soon miss good fires the year around, if I could miss 'em by there not being any," laughed Fred.

"Oh, well," replied the man, whose name was Davis, "at any time we're likely to have——"

Clang! Jangle!

The alarm was coming in now.

Every man present made a leap for his fire togs, then fell in at the ropes of the machine that he ran with.

From up the street Phin came back on the dead run.

"Two!" counted Byron, as the bell ceased for a pause.

Then it began again.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight——"

"Twenty-eight!"

"Burdick's Mill!"

That shout was on every fireman's lips as they dashed out with the engine and truck.

The mill was half a mile away, on the bank of the river.

It was a rather large cotton goods plant, employing some five hundred people.

A fire from this locality generally meant a stubborn fight.

Sometimes the fire would start, by spontaneous combustion, or from other causes, in the great coal-bins down by the tracks.

At other times fires had been known to get started among the bales of raw cotton.

Either of these fires was apt to be disastrous.

On the other hand, a fire caused by the friction of shaft-ings close to the ceiling was easily controlled as a rule.

Every man and boy wondered, as he ran, what kind of blaze to expect.

They saw, plainly enough, as they turned into the short street leading down to the river front.

There was much smoke, splashed here and there by flame coming from the windows of the shipping room, next to the offices of the company.

"It's going to be one of those sullen, stubborn fires, deep down in cotton goods," grunted George Byron to himself.

They drew up, making close connections with the hose.

Several brawny men from the night shift of workers were standing outside, waiting for the arrival of the apparatus.

With them, highly excited, was Peyton Burdick, president of the company.



"Chief," shouted Mr. Burdick, running toward Byron, "order my men in any way you like. They're all used to fighting fire."

"Put them at the bars of the engine, then, Mr. Burdick. I want my own men inside with me. Here, six of you get pikes, ten axes, and the rest run with rubber blankets to throw over goods that haven't caught yet."

Only two of the men did Byron reserve to run in with him carrying the line of hose.

While Burdick's men pumped with splendid brawn and muscle, Byron led the members of his department almost at a run through the office of the company.

As they opened the door of the shipping room beyond, a great burst of hot smoke belched out in their faces.

"Crouch down, those who can! Don't stand too high!" ordered Byron. "Pass word to play away!"

"Play away!" was the word sent back by lusty throats.

Fred was one of those who had snatched up a fire axe.

Phin, pick in hand, pressed close to him, yet not looking at our hero.

The first few hundred gallons of water only made the smoke denser.

It was evident that the fire would be a long and stubborn one.

But, by degrees, Byron and his nozzlemen fought the flames back from the office door.

After that they were able to get some distance into the shipping room.

"Now, axemen and pikemen!" bawled Byron. "Jump in and be quick!"

He himself led the way, showing his men where they could batter down blazing wood, or haul it down with the pikes.

Those with the rubber blankets found that they could do much better by pitching in with a will and hauling out the cases.

"Pass 'em this way!" called Fred, from the door of the office. "We will take care of them for you!"

He and Tom worked like beavers, taking the packing cases of goods at the office door and pushing them back into the office.

Mr. Burdick himself stood behind them, watching and giving an occasional helping hand.

"I'm glad I stayed late at the office to-night, going over the books," he muttered.

"Books are tight in the safe, now, aren't they, sir?" Fred called back without turning around.

"All secure," nodded Mr. Burdick.

"What's the matter with the stream?" bawled Byron, from the smoke-filled air of the shipping room. "The water's coming mighty slow."

"I'll find out," answered Mr. Burdick, and, turning, dashed from the office.

He found that his men had been letting up in the ardor of their pumping.

He set them harder at work, and stood by to watch them.

As the water came faster, the smoke and steam grew in volume.

Phin, fighting well for some time with a pike, staggered back, gasping.

"Lungs full?" asked Byron, noticing him.

"Yes," gasped Phin Holmes.

"Run out and get some fresh air for a minute. Then come back. There is a load of work here to-night."

Coughing and breathing hard, Phin stepped back into the office.

He passed Fred and Tom without speaking.

"Oh, he's sore," whispered Tom, vindictively.

"We can't help it," said Fred, carelessly.

The two chums stood with their backs turned to the office.

Just at this moment no more cases were coming their way, but they were waiting and watching the efforts of the others.

Phin circled curiously around the office, on tip-toe.

Then, suddenly, he started as his eyes fell upon the desk that Mr. Burdick had abandoned so swiftly when he discovered the presence of fire.

A long, thick wallet lay there.

Glancing swiftly toward the two chums, Phin then stretched out one hand.

He laid the wallet open.

It was well-stuffed with crisp, new bank-notes.

## CHAPTER VI.

### "FRED HOPE, YOU FELON!"

It was a stubborn fight for three-quarters of an hour.

By the end of that time everything in the shipping room was so well drenched that the fire sizzled out.

There was still smoke and steam, but George Byron, Mr. Burdick and the mill's night engineer, after going well over the scene of the late fire, pronounced it to be out.

"By George!" exclaimed Mr. Burdick, suddenly, slapping the breast of his coat.

"No, it isn't there," he muttered. "Could I have put it in the safe?"

"What's that, sir?" asked George Byron.

"Why, I've just remembered my wallet."

"What about it, sir?"

"It was on my desk when the fire started."

"Much in it?" asked the acting chief.

"Two thousand dollars that I was to pay out for taxes to-morrow!"

Mr. Burdick was moving fast toward the office door.

Byron went swiftly after him.

Mr. Burdick took one glance at his desk, then uttered:

"I'm sure I left it there."

Nevertheless, he ran over to the safe, working the combination on the lock with trembling fingers.

At last he swung open the door of the great safe, and explored inside.

"It's not here," he said, grimly.



"Are you sure you left it on the desk, Mr. Burdick?" queried Byron.

"Positive."

"Were any of your men in here before the department arrived?"

"I'm rather certain not," replied Mr. Burdick, with a grave-looking face.

"None of our men would take it," went on Byron, quickly.

"Oh, I didn't think that," replied the president of the company. "But the only fact is that the money was in the wallet, lying on my desk, and it isn't there now."

"Call in the chief of police," suggested Byron, his face looking grim indeed.

"What do you——"

"I think, Mr. Burdick, you should make a statement to the chief of police," Byron retorted. "This is a serious matter, indeed."

Mr. Burdick started for the outer door, looking very worried.

Raising his voice, Byron called:

"No member of the department will leave, at present."

Mr. Burdick came back, followed by Chief Watts and the solitary other night policeman of the village.

"Where did you leave the wallet?" asked the chief, looking around.

"On the desk."

"Look in the drawers yourself, Mr. Burdick. I'll look on the floor."

Both men were busy for a few tense, silent, wondering moments.

"Not in any of the drawers," reported Mr. Burdick.

"Not on the floor, either," said the chief.

The two men straightened up and looked at each other.

"Mr. Burdick," went on Chief Watts, "you're positive that none of your men went through here before the firemen came?"

"As positive as a man can be at a time of great excitement."

"Hope," broke in the acting fire chief, "you and Darrell were here at the office door most of the time. Did either of you see any mill employee, or any stranger in the office?"

"I saw none but members of the department passing through," Fred replied without an instant's hesitation.

"Which members?"

"Oh, several, chief. I can't remember all who went through here. I was busy with my duties, and didn't pay much attention to anyone else."

"What have you got to say, Darrell?" persisted Byron.

"Same thing as Fred," Tom answered, at once.

"It begins to look," said Byron, "as if none but firemen passed through here."

"I was back here for one," spoke up Phin. "I hope there can be no suspicion about me——"

"Hardly," replied Chief Watts, tersely.

This son of a wealthy broker could have little motive for stealing.

"But I'd like to be searched," proposed Phin, eagerly. "I feel that it's only right and fair."

"That's so," spoke up Fireman Davis. "And I'd like to be searched, too. I think we all ought to be searched. It's the quickest way of clearing us all of suspicion."

"I'll stand for the first search," proposed George Byron, advancing and holding up his hands. "Line up, men!"

Quickly enough they lined up in the office, and held up their hands.

Every member of the fire department displayed the greatest willingness to have his pockets and clothing explored.

"There's no need to search, Mr. Byron," objected Burdick.

"I insist upon being searched," retorted the acting chief, gruffly.

Chief Watts made the search in person.

"You haven't any stolen wallet on you, I'm glad to say, George," reported the chief of police.

Then the police chief turned to Phin Holmes, who happened to be next in line.

Nothing was found on Phin.

"I don't know what I'd do or feel like, if stolen money was found on a member of the Wakefield department," uttered Byron, solemnly. "The most criminal thing that a fireman can do is to steal from a burning building that has been placed under his especial protection."

"Right! That's so!" came the responses from several present.

Davis, Tom Darrell and Micky Flynn were next searched, but without results.

"You may have the wallet, you know, Hope," smiled Chief Watts, as he began to run his hands down over Fred's clothing. "Eh? What?"

Chief Watts staggered back in horror, clutching at a long, black wallet that he had just drawn from the inside of Fred's rubber coat.

If the chief of police felt utterly staggered and paralyzed, he didn't begin to know how our hero felt.

"Why, I never saw that thing before!" Fred Hope protested, hoarsely.

There was a fearful silence in the room.

Then the police chief spoke, huskily:

"Fred, I hope you can account for this."

"But I—I can't," stammered the boy.

"Let me see the wallet," cried Mr. Burdick, pressing forward. "Yes, this is the wallet and the money."

"Count the money, Mr. Burdick, and see if it is all there," suggested Chief Watts.

No one stirred, save the president of the mill company, as he walked over to his desk, took out the fat pad of banknotes and commenced to count.

"All here, to a dollar, I think," announced Mr. Burdick, as he finished.

All through this tense, painful silence, Fred Hope had stood white-faced, hardly seeming to breathe.



But now he broke out, fiercely:

"You surely don't accuse me of stealing that wallet!"

Chief Watts looked at Mr. Burdick, who nodded.

"I'm sorry, Fred Hope," went on the policeman, in a grave but sympathetic tone. "I'm afraid the evidence looks rather bad. I shall be obliged to lock you up on a charge of the greatest crime that can be laid at the door of a fireman—stealing from the building that he entered in the discharge of his duty!"

"Take me, then," groaned the boy.

Though his face was ghastly white, his head was up as he was led away from the silent crowd.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE DARK DAYS.

"If the evidence does not directly fasten the crime upon the accused, yet the evidence is at least strong enough to compel the court to hold the prisoner in two thousand dollars' bail for the action of the Grand Jury!"

Those fateful words, pronounced by Justice Seabury in the district court at Wakefield, the following morning, went through Fred Hope's heart like so many knives.

The young fireman looked utterly wretched.

Nor did his looks belie him.

He had spent the night in a cell, the solitary prisoner in the lock-up.

His mother, tearful, but firm in her belief in her son's whole innocence, had visited him.

So had Tom, Dave, Micky and Billy Gray, and a few other friends.

But none of them had possessed or commanded the wealth necessary to bail the crushed youngster out for the night.

And now, in the morning, he found himself bound over in twice as high a bail, with the prospect of spending weeks in the county jail ere his case could be reached.

Most of the members of the fire department were in court this morning.

So were as many other people as could crowd into the little courtroom.

As Justice Seabury pronounced the fateful words, a low, stifled sob came from Mrs. Hope.

Fred glanced swiftly at his mother, but no tears came to his own eyes.

He was too dazed, too bewildered, too indignant at blind justice, to feel any of the softer emotions at that moment.

"I've heard of innocent people being convicted of crime before," groaned the boy inwardly. "I never before realized how possible such a thing is."

"Prisoner," asked the court, "have you any bail to offer?"

"I—I'm afraid not," Fred answered, huskily.

"Yes, he has, yes, he has! Let me through, please, neighbors!"

Old Mr. Thurman was at the back of the court-room pushing his way through to the front.

Out of respect for the old man the crowd parted as readily as it could.

"Your honor," cried the banker, flushed and panting, "I wish to go on the bail-bond of Fred Hope."

The crowd looked on and understood.

Mr. Thurman was not proclaiming his belief in the prisoner's innocence.

The old man was merely proving that he still remembered his gratitude for the saving of his child's life by this now disgraced young fireman.

Amid the curious silence Mr. Thurman qualified on the bail-bond.

At first Fred had flushed with pleasure.

But now the old, white, set look had come back into his face.

He understood as well as the others did why Mr. Thurman was doing this thing.

"Prisoner," spoke the court, half-kindly, "you are admitted to bail and are at liberty to leave the court room whenever you please."

But Mr. Thurman had leaned over the rail of the dock and was shaking hands with the young prisoner.

"I don't believe you did it, Hope," said the old man, earnestly. "Thieving doesn't go with such conduct as you've displayed at other times. Get your mother and come with me."

Few of the spectators had left as yet.

Now they looked on curiously as the respected old banker walked out of the court-room with Fred and his mother.

An instant later the crowd surged after them.

Outside, in a carriage, sat Nellie Thurman.

Her sweet eyes looked sad and full of trouble, but her head was held high.

She leaned forward to give her hand swiftly to Fred, and to look swiftly, confidently into his eyes.

Then she grasped the hand of Mrs. Hope, who was sobbing softly behind her veil.

"It'll all come out right, Mrs. Hope," cried Nellie. "You know that as well as we do. Now, get in, please. We want you to drive away with us."

"Home," ordered Mr. Thurman of the coachman.

As the wheels began to move Tom Darrell shouted:

"Three cheers for Fred Hope, the best and squarest fellow in Wakefield!"

A crowd is easily influenced. The cheers went up heartily as the carriage rolled away.

Out on the edge of the crowd there was a commotion.

Mickey Flynn was doing his best to "knock daylight through" a man who had looked on with a sneering smile.

And for once Mickey won his fight, against a man twice his own weight.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Mrs. Hope, softly, as soon as she noticed the course the carriage was taking.

"To our home," said Nellie. "We wish you to pay us a little visit this forenoon, and to have luncheon with us."



"I don't feel as if I could ever eat again," said Fred's mother, tremulously.

"I want to say right now, Hope," broke in Mr. Thurman, "that I meant to, and insist on, providing the lawyer and meeting all the expenses of your defense. If we find it worth while, we will even put trained detectives at work on the case. But acquitted you must and shall be! That has been decided upon by my family and myself!"

Then, at last, poor Fred did break down.

Not that he cried.

He wouldn't have done that for worlds.

But the color came and went in his face as he tried to thank the Thurmans.

Mrs. Hope, too, did her best, until Nellie, patting her hand, broke in, softly:

"There, there, don't thank us, Mrs. Hope. Remember how great our debt is."

They drove into the Thurman grounds, and, two minutes later, after Mrs. Hope had been carried off by Nellie, Mr. Thurman took the boy into his roomy, cosy library.

"I don't believe you ever stole that money, Hope," said the banker, confidently. "None of us believe it. And we're going to find a way to back up our opinion of you. In the first place, though I'm not a lawyer, I don't believe that the evidence is of just the kind that convicts you. Some one else, who had a grudge against you, could have slipped that wallet into your pocket, and I believe that any jury can be made to realize that."

"But, even if I am acquitted," groaned Fred, "most people, I am afraid, will still believe me guilty."

"They're fools if they do!" broke out the banker, wrathily.

"But they'll still suspect me, I'm afraid, sir. And, knowing that they do, it will be worse than death for me."

"Oh, come, come! Cheer up, Hope!"

"If you think I'm afraid, or lacking in nerve," retorted Fred, "then you don't know me. But it will be fearful for my mother. I'm afraid, in any case, she'll have to leave Wakefield. She couldn't bear to stay here, especially if——"

"Well?" almost growled Mr. Thurman.

"If I happen to be sent to prison," finished Fred, bitterly.

"Nonsense, you're not going to prison. And we'll chase some one up a tree, and keep him there, for this outrage against your good name, Fred Hope!" cried the old man.

It was very pleasant to be among friends at such a trying time.

Fred was made to feel the fineness of the Thurman friendship for him that forenoon.

Ere long, the ladies, who had been joined by Mrs. Thurman, joined them in the library.

Mrs. Hope, under the influence of so much friendly sympathy, found her appetite for luncheon, and was in almost gay spirits through the meal.

Mrs. Thurman invited them both to remain at the house

for the present, but this, Fred's mother gratefully declared, was out of the question.

So, along toward dark, a carriage was brought around to the door, and Fred and his mother made the journey back to their little home of three rooms behind the store.

The store was promptly thrown open to the public, and Fred's mother, forcing a smile bravely, went behind the counter to wait on any customers that might come.

Fred, too, remained in the store.

But customers were very few that evening.

Many passers-by, however, looked in with an evident curiosity that made Mrs. Hope's face flush painfully.

"Who got the boodle?" yelled a thoughtless small boy in passing.

Fred's face twitched, but beyond that he paid no heed.

Then some older hoodlums, from across the street, called out insulting remarks.

Fred could stand it no longer.

He vaulted a counter, dashing through the door.

These hoodlums were old enough to know better.

Two or three of the hoodlums started to walk along when they saw Fred coming along under such a head of steam.

"Don't run, you cowards!" he mocked, angrily.

At that they turned back.

There were seven or eight of the hoodlums, but Fred wouldn't have cared had there been a score.

He sailed into them with the energy and the force of a pile-driver.

Three of them he knocked down ere they realized that they had been picked out for his attack.

"Jump him! Biff the crook!" yelled one of the fallen hoodlums.

Then the gang jumped on him.

But they had started just a second too late.

"Save the best two f'r me! Whoop!" yelled Mickey Flynn, darting into the thick of the scrimmage.

Tom Darrell had singled out the biggest hoodlum of them all, this time, and began to hammer him royally.

Dave Freeman grappled with one hoodlum, and coolly threw him over a fence into a yard.

Billy Gray, the bungler, wanted his share of it.

He made a dive for one hoodlum, rushed at him, tripped and fell flat.

But, even at that, Billy got the fellow by the feet and toppled him over.

Before such onslaught, though they outnumbered Fred's crowd, the hoodlums were soon begging for quarter, or else running as fast as they could.

"Get out of this neighborhood, and stay away!" ordered Tom Darrell, his eyes flashing. "We know who you fellows are, now, and, if you show up around here again, we'll thump the life out of you!"

That was plain enough talk to prevent loitering of hoodlums anywhere near the Hope store for a week after that.

"Thank you, fellows," acknowledged our hero, gratefully, shaking hands all around.



Then these four staunch friends, who had been prowling quietly in the neighborhood for some time, crossed the street and stood before the store door with Fred.

It was pleasant to have such friends as these and the Thurmans.

Yet there was no disguising the fact that these were dark days.

Fred would not consent to keep in hiding.

He showed himself freely, and with head up and eyes quietly defiant.

Yet he felt the darkness of these days just the same as they dragged by.

It was the fourth day after Fred's arrest when he came face to face with Phin Holmes for the first time.

Both were walking along Main Street, in opposite directions, so that they met.

"I won't speak to him unless he speaks to me," Fred decided in a flash.

Phin was looking straight ahead as they met.

"He isn't going to speak, of course," murmured Fred.

"Well, there's one friend I can just as well do without, I guess."

Phin was now three feet past our hero.

"Huh!" vented Holmes, sneeringly.

Fred could not, for the life of him, repress the temptation to turn and look after his enemy.

Phin had turned at the same time.

"Huh!" repeated Phin.

"Huh!" echoed Fred, coolly.

"If I was you," growled Phin, "I'd go and hide my face."

"You wouldn't if you had half the courage a man ought to have," Fred snapped.

"Huh! You've got your cheek yet. But I don't intend to stand here chinning with you. It won't do me much good to be seen confabbing with a thief!"

"It won't hurt your reputation any to be seen fighting with me, will it?" cried Fred, in torment at the insult.

His face very white, he went back to Phin, ready to hit out in an instant.

But young Holmes drew back.

"Say, you're brave, ain't you, Fred Hope?" he sneered.

"You know you can lick me, so you want to do it."

"Take back that word 'thief,'" insisted Fred, more quietly, "and I won't attempt to thrash you."

"I'll take back nothing," snarled Phin.

"Then I'll thump you!"

Fred advanced, full of his purpose.

His flashing eyes scared the other youngster.

"Hold on," faltered Phin, dropping back, "I'll withdraw the word, since you're so touchy about it."

"Any honest boy ought to be touchy about a word like that," retorted Fred, letting his hands fall at his sides again.

Then he turned on his heel and walked on.

"Oh, you big bully," growled Phin after him.

But to this taunt our hero paid no heed.

At the next corner Phin ran into Tom Darrell.

"See here, Holmes, you were trying to pick a row with Fred Hope, were you?"

"Is that any of your business?" snarled Holmes.

"I'm going to make it so," retorted Tom. "You follow me to a good field near here, and we'll have it out."

"I'm not going to fight you," sniffed Phin.

"Oh, yes, you are! If you don't, I tell all the fellows that I called you all the names I could think of and that you——"

"What?" quivered Phin.

"I'll tell the fellows that you took it all just like a girl-baby!" finished Tom, explosively.

"See here, Tom, what are you trying to pick a fight with me for?" half-whined the coward.

"Because you're low-down enough to torment a splendid fellow like Fred Hope, whose little finger is worth more than your whole carcass. Now, the question is, are you going to fight, or are you going to take the laugh from every fellow in town?"

"But I tell you, I wasn't bothering Hope."

"And I tell you, you lie!" snapped Tom, who had seen the look on his chum's face, even at the distance. "Are you going to stand being called a low-down liar? Or will you go with me to the field I just mentioned to you?"

"Lead the way," snarled Holmes, who saw that there was no safe way out of a fight with this hot-head.

There, behind a high-board fence, Tom Darrell polished off Phin Holmes until the latter was contented to admit that he had had enough.

He also promised that he would never annoy Fred Hope again.

As a small feature of the fracas, Phin went away from that encounter with a swelling eye that soon needed the services of the decorative artist at the drug-store again.

Tom, whose father owned the drug-store, smiled grimly when he heard of it.

Later in the day Phin ran afoul of Mickey Flynn, who was looking for him everywhere.

Another adjournment to a field was necessary.

There, though Mickey put up a good, stiff, all-around fight, he devoted himself, first of all, to causing a decided swelling under Phin's other eye.

Yet all this staunch and enthusiastic work by his few close friends didn't by any means bring life back to the old, happy plane for Fred Hope.

Those were dark days for the lad—darker still, for his mother.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE VALUE OF A FRIEND.

The music of an orchestra crashed out merrily in the big, well-lighted double drawing-rooms of the Thurman residence.

Miss Nellie was giving her Fall party, the biggest and brightest of the year in Wakefield.



Already at least two score of the young people of the town had arrived.

Their merry laughter and chatter threatened to drown out the orchestra, but who cared?

Mr. and Mrs. Thurman, both beaming happily, looked on at the lively scene.

Miss Nellie, in pure white, and without a jewel, but a dark red rose in her jet-black hair, stood near the door receiving those who entered.

Phin Holmes was not there, and not going to be, much as he hated to keep away from this lively affair at which Miss Nellie presided.

He had had his invitation, as a matter of course.

"But every one in town knows that I've got painted eyes," he grumbled. "I'd have to stand too much guying. Besides, Tom Darrell will be there."

Tom was there, in fact, at this very moment.

He always had been invited to Miss Nellie's parties.

But some surprise ran around the room when Mickey Flynn entered.

He was accompanied by Billy Gray, who promptly tripped in a drapery at the door and fell flat, rising in much confusion.

"Why, they've never been here before," observed one girl with a turned-up nose to another girl at her side. "Is Nellie Thurman going to invite everyone?"

"Mr. and Miss Freeman!" called the footman, and Dave and his sister entered, to receive a very friendly greeting from the young hostess.

The orchestra was tuning up for a waltz now.

Word had been passed around, and the young people were pairing off in anticipation.

"Mr. Frederick Hope!"

The orchestra had just begun, and some feet had started to glide, but that announcement took the breath away from almost every one in the rooms who was not expecting it.

Fred, just a trifle pale, but very self-possessed, crossed to where Miss Nellie stood and made a very low bow before her.

He had practiced that bow in private!

"Oh, I am so glad you're here, Mr. Hope," cried Nellie, extending her hand eagerly, and with her most engaging smile. "It had grown so late that I feared you weren't coming."

Fred made his excuses, which were very graciously accepted.

Then, as he turned away from the hostess, his own special chums closed in gladly around him.

A few more came forward to extend him their hands.

But, for the most part, the young people contented themselves with eying him curiously from a distance.

He had not come to please himself.

Miss Nellie had dropped in at the store to hand him her invitation, in person.

"Surely, you don't want me there, Miss Thurman," he had gasped, in great surprise.

"Most surely I do," she had retorted.

"But I'm hardly respectable, these days, you know," he smiled.

"Hasn't papa declared that you are?" flashed Nellie.

"Yes."

"Haven't the rest of us also?"

"Yes; I surely have some very good friends."

"Are you going back on the declarations that we've made?" challenged Miss Thurman.

"Why, that's a strange way of putting it, Miss Thurman."

"Are you going to spoil my party?"

"I spoil it? How, Miss Thurman?"

"By remaining away from it."

"But surely that wouldn't——"

"Just as surely it would," retorted Miss Thurman, positively.

So Fred yielded.

He accepted the invitation, and here he was, very nearly as well dressed and fully as self-possessed as any of the sons of better-to-do parents who were there.

The orchestra, paying no heed to the sudden diversion, had gone on playing.

A few at a time, the young people started in dancing.

But still many curious glances were cast toward Fred.

He could not pretend that he was ignorant of those glances.

Nellie, too, saw and understood.

But she waited, biding her time.

As the music ceased, she walked over to where Fred Hope's little group of friends stood.

She joined them, chatting heartily and unaffectedly.

It soon became plain to all, however, that most of her remarks were being addressed to our hero.

"Well, of all the brass, for that fellow to come here!" muttered one priggish young fellow to the girl on his arm.

"What is there against him?"

"Why don't you know?"

"I know nothing."

"He belongs to the local fire department——"

"That's no disgrace," broke in the girl, quickly. "That's an honor."

"But he stole two thousand dollars at the mill, while pretending to fight a fire there."

"Then why isn't he in prison?" asked the girl, innocently.

"Why, he hasn't been convicted yet."

"Then perhaps he isn't guilty," contended the girl.

"Oh, it's a cinch that he's guilty."

"Then Nellie Thurman has been guilty of a great breach of good taste, hasn't she, inviting a felon here?" asked the girl, with an innocence of tone that hid a good deal of irony.

"Why—er—er——" stammered the young prig, caught in his own trap.

"I believe I'll ask you to excuse me, Mr. Sidney," finished the girl, dropping his arm and strolling over to where Nellie Thurman stood with her guests.



But not every gossip was treated as justly as young Sidney.

The buzz of comment flew around so lively that it was a wonder that the chorus was not audible to the hostess and to the friend whom she was so publicly honoring.

"He might at least have the good sense not to come here until his trial is over and his innocence proved," hinted one young miss.

"If his innocence ever is proved!"

"Yes; there's the gravest doubt that it ever will be proved."

"Anyway, Fred Hope never belonged in our set."

"That's just the way with these nobodies."

"Yes; they like to cheek themselves in where they know they don't belong!"

"Oh, I tell you, Fred Hope is one of the best of good fellows," chimed in another young fellow.

"How long have you known him?"

"At least ten years. We've been at school together."

"He thinks a good deal of himself, doesn't he?"

"I never saw any signs of it. But I'm pretty sure that I'd be stuck on myself, if I had a record of having saved four lives."

"Huh!"

"I think I'll go early to-night. I don't exactly like the crowd. Nellie Thurman used to be a little more select."

Yet, on the whole, the comment was good-natured, or curious.

"You dance, of course?" asked Nellie, in a low tone, as soon as she could speak to Fred without being overheard.

"I've danced some."

"The next number is a polka," Nellie went on.

Fred looked at her keenly.

"Well?" she hinted, a little impatiently.

"Well?" repeated Fred. "I don't understand—I'm afraid."

"I'm giving you a chance to ask me to dance the first number of my evening with you."

"Miss Nellie!" he cried, in a low but intense tone.

"I was in hopes you would like the idea," she smiled, poutingly.

"Why, I——"

"Stage fright?" demanded Nellie, laughingly.

"You don't want to be seen dancing with me, Miss Nellie."

"Well, I'm not going to ask you—again!" smiled Nellie.

"But will you really honor me with the dance?"

Nellie nodded smilingly at him.

Just then the orchestra's strains floated through the rooms.

Miss Nellie went away on his arm.

Tom Darrell followed with Dave's sister.

Dave himself had found a partner and joined.

Nor had Billy Gray or Mickey Flynn been overlooked.

Miss Nellie had already introduced them to partners.

"My gracious!" sniffed one girl to her partner.

"Fred Hope is plainly the guest of honor this evening," laughed the young man who was dancing with her. "I don't begrudge him, though. A fellow who goes in to save life at every risk of his own must be a good fellow about all the way through."

"You think so?" flashed the girl.

"It's just a little private notion of mine. Of course I may be wrong, but——"

And so it went—all kinds of comment.

Miss Nellie, at the conclusion of the dance, did not release Fred's arm.

Truly, as one young guest had observed, she was doing her best to make him the guest of honor.

That being the case, it was not long ere most of the young people were smiling very cheerily on Fred.

For few of those present cared to run any risk of being left off Miss Thurman's next invitation-list.

The next dance, and the one after that went to Fred.

His head began to be in a whirl.

"I'll wake up later, and realize what a dream it's all been," he told himself, grimly.

He noted Phin's absence and wondered at it.

Had that disagreeable youngster been left out of the affair?

"But that's not like Miss Nellie," the young fireman told himself. "Even if she knows there's trouble between us, she wouldn't take sides. She'd let us have it out between us."

Presently, almost before he realized it, he asked:

"Phin Holmes won't be here to-night?"

"I'm afraid not," Nellie answered, calmly. "He was invited, though."

"I wonder where Phin can be then?"

"I don't know, Fred."

Phin was morose and sore this evening, for a certainty. He wanted badly to be at the party, but was afraid of being teased about his damaged eyes.

He was hungry, too, for a glimpse of Miss Nellie, and a good chat with her.

He longed to worm himself back into her good graces.

"But I can't talk sentiment with a damaged lamp on either side of my nose," he growled, roughly.

Two or three times through the evening he felt strongly tempted to throw all prudence to the winds.

He came very near hastening home, dressing and presenting himself, even late, as a guest at the party.

"At least, that would be one place where I wouldn't meet Fred Hope," muttered young Holmes, disgustedly.

Yet, though he couldn't guess it now, Phin was fully destined to encounter Fred Hope ere the night was over.

## CHAPTER IX.

"NO CROOKS WANTED HERE."

As the lively, happy evening wore on, our hero almost forgot that there was such a word as "trouble" in the English language.



Nellie Thurman possessed, in the fullest degree, the wonderful knack of making those around her happy.

By the time that the party had worn off its first stiffness she had succeeded in making every one present understand that she wanted Fred Hope treated with the greatest consideration.

And that without saying a word directly to any one on the subject.

Fred actually forgot to be wretched, or to feel any forebodings as to what the courts might do to him in the near future.

"What a wonderful girl she is!" Fred murmured to himself.

He was looking at her with his soul in his eyes.

Nellie, turning at that instant, and catching his gaze, smiled at him with a friendliness that made his pulses jump.

Then she came toward him, whispering almost:

"I'm going to present you to Miss Preston. I know you'll enjoy the next dance with her. But you asked me for the one after that, didn't you?"

So Fred whirled off in a waltz with Miss Preston, whom he had never met before.

He quickly realized that she was one of the nicest young ladies it had ever been his pleasure to meet.

He did not dance every number with Nellie, but many of them.

When she did not dance with him, Nellie found him a partner who was sure to be agreeable.

"I can't remember that I've ever had such a splendid evening," Fred confided to one of these partners.

"That's because you're at the Thurman's," smiled the girl. "Nellie always knows how to make her parties delightful. Every one is happy here!"

"I know I am!" sighed Fred.

The music had just ceased.

Fred had led his partner back to a seat at the side of the room, but she still remained standing to chat with him.

"What's that?" cried Fred, suddenly.

He started, turning toward an open window nearby.

Ding! Ding, Dong!

The fire alarm!

Instantly the five young firemen present stopped in the midst of their talk and looked at each other.

They were counting and fidgeting.

Well enough they knew that, for them, the happy evening was over.

Duty was calling.

Fred lingered by the window long enough to finish the count.

His four friends in the department had hurried over to him.

Nellie, too, had joined the little group.

"Do you have to go—to-night?" she asked, disappointedly.

"A fireman has to be on swift feet every time he hears the alarm bell," Fred smiled wistfully.

"Forty-two!" broke in Tom Darrell.

But now Mr. Thurman had hastily joined them.

"Wait!" he cried. "I'll telephone the stable for the three-seated Rockaway. Forty-two is at the asylum, a mile and a half from here. You'll lose nothing in time by waiting for the Rockaway. I'll drive you!"

There was a scurry for hats, while Mr. Thurman telephoned.

"Me best clothes t'foight a fire in!" uttered Mickey, in disgust.

"We have to go, just the same," returned Fred. "A fireman can't wait to dress for his job."

"Where can the fire be this time?" wondered Tom.

"The box is close to the asylum," Fred replied. "I hope it isn't there. Think of the poor lunatics, made mad by the flames. If it's there I hope it's nothing but a fizzle of a fire."

"Carriage is ready, young gentlemen!" called the banker, as the roll of wheels was heard at the door. "You get in the front seat, Fred. The rest of you pile in behind."

A pair of handsome, strong-limbed blacks was hitched to the Rockaway.

"Good luck, boys!" cheered Nellie from the door, as the start was made.

"Don't any of you boys know how to cheer our brave young firemen when they set off on their great, noble work?"

So, ere the Rockaway reached the gate, Fred and his friends heard a rousing yell from the porch:

"Three cheers for our boy firemen! Tiger!"

The cheers came faintly after them. Mr. Thurman, who loved driving, had urged his fine blacks into their best road gait.

"Whew! But it is from the asylum!" burst from Tom Darrell's lips as the carriage whirled through the village and out upon the country road.

"It's the biggest blaze we've had in Wakefield!" gasped Dave.

"What an illigant fight it'd be av it was a man of that soize, instead av a foire!" murmured Mickey.

"Fellows, there won't be anything that the department can do, except to save life," announced Fred, turning back to his chums. "The whole building is doomed. Look at the flames leap up! Our little stream of water won't do a thing there but make a little steam!"

"Now, I hope you youngsters won't get foolhardy," warned Mr. Thurman, as he looked ahead at the fierce conflagration which they were approaching. "Don't rush in unless there's someone to be saved."

"We're under the acting chief's orders, sir," Fred replied, quietly. "He doesn't spare anyone at a fire, not even himself."

"What are firemen for, if they can't face danger?" Tom wanted to know.

"Here comes the apparatus, behind us," announced Dave.

"We'll be there first, then," glowed Fred. "Being at a



party didn't interfere any with our discharge of duty—Thanks to Mr. Thurman!"

Several men could be seen running about the grounds as the carriage dashed up the long road through the asylum grounds.

One man, shrieking at the top of his voice, sped down across the lawn, pursued by a uniformed keeper.

"The poor lunatic!" throbbed Fred, pityingly.

Over at one side of the grounds the bright glare of the flames showed two young doctors, a few keepers and at least a score of the insane whom they were trying to quiet.

"All out!" yelled Fred, the instant the blacks stopped.

Five leaps were made from the carriage in the same instant.

Then Mr. Thurman drove the blacks away at a distance to hitch them.

Dr. Douglass, the superintendent of the asylum, came hurrying to meet the boys as they rushed toward the great, blazing pile.

"Do you belong to the fire department?" he called.

"Yes," Fred answered. "And the apparatus is right behind us."

"Thank heaven you're all so prompt!"

"I don't believe we're going to save that building, doctor."

"I don't expect you to. But I'm afraid some of our poor inmates are still in there. I've been waiting for some of you trained fire-fighters. Now, I'll lead you through inside, if you'll follow."

"Lead on the instant," Fred requested.

"Hold on," voiced Dave. "Here's the apparatus, and the acting chief."

So the five turned, and ran over to where the engine and the truck had just stopped.

Dr. Douglass followed them.

"Where's the chief?" he called, anxiously.

"I'm the acting chief," responded George Byron, leaping forward. "How about your inmates, doctor?"

"I fear that at least six of them are still in there."

"We'll do our best to get them out, then," replied Byron.

"Davis, you and Cassell rig the hose and play it where you think it will do any good. But the real work cut out for us, this time, is to try to save lives. Come on, men! Let no man on Volunteer One hang back or flinch to-night!"

Forward they ran, Dr. Douglass doing his best to keep in the lead.

"Around to the east door!" he shouted. "I think we can get up the stairs there!"

"In there, all of you!" ordered Byron, halting an instant to make sure all his men leaped forward.

Then his glance fell on Fred Hope.

"What are you doing here?" scowled the acting chief.

"Ready to do my duty," answered Fred, paling.

"No crooks wanted here!" roared the acting chief, angrily. "Get back and keep out!"

He gave Fred an impatient push.

Then, as the humiliated, dazed boy still stood there, Byron struck him harder, throwing him back.

So hard was the blow, in fact, that Fred Hope fell over backward, his head striking on a stone that lay there.

Instantly his eyes closed. There was no sign of life.

He was down and out!

## CHAPTER X.

### FRED'S BIG STEP.

"Shame!" cried some of the few spectators who had gathered.

George Byron turned, looked at his unconscious victim, and looked worried.

"All into the building with you, quick!" he cried.

"That was the most cowardly thing I ever saw!" blazed Tom Darrell, leaning over his chum.

"Into the house with you!"

"Don't you think this poor fellow needs as much attention as any one in that building?" demanded Tom, indignantly.

"You're talking too much, Darrell!" blustered the acting chief.

"Not half as much as I'm going to," retorted Tom, boiling over. "If this turns out serious for Fred I'm going to have you arrested for your cowardly act. You'll find that you'll be put through for it, too."

"You're suspended from the department, Darrell!" blazed George Byron.

"Yes? What for?"

"Mutiny!"

"You'll find a good deal worse than mutiny ahead of you!" threatened Tom.

Then he knelt beside Fred.

"Here, Dave, we ought to get him away from here. It's too hot," cried Dave.

Dave Freeman, with never a look at the acting chief, turned and came quickly back.

Together they lifted Fred and bore him back to a spot under the trees, where they laid him down upon a rubber blanket.

One man who had just alighted from a buggy came swiftly over to them.

It was Mr. Holden, President of the Board of Village Trustees.

"Whom have we here?" asked Mr. Holden. "Why, it's Hope? Was he hurt in the discharge of duty?"

"No; he was struck down by that fellow, Byron," Tom retorted.

"Struck down?"

Dave coolly told the story of what had happened.

"That was going altogether too far," declared Mr. Holden. "We shall have to have Mr. Byron up before the Board to explain his action."

"If Fred don't come out of this easily, I'll have him up before the judge!" blurted Tom.

Dave had brought water, and was washing away the clotted blood on the cut at the back of our hero's head.



"What are you fellows all doing?" asked Fred, suddenly, *opening his eyes.*

"Then you're all right, old fellow?" cried Tom, joyously.

"I feel a bit of a headache, but I guess that's the worst of it," responded Fred, as he sat up, feeling of his injury.

"But what made Byron act that way?"

"He'll explain that to the Board," hinted Mr. Holden again.

Fred got upon his feet.

"See here," he murmured, "you fellows don't need to stay with me. And you're needed inside—badly I guess."

Then he added, wistfully:

"I'd go myself, if it wasn't for Byron's order to keep out."

"Do you feel fit for duty to-night, Hope?" asked Mr. Holden, quickly.

"Why, I feel as strong as a lion," responded Fred, wistfully.

"Then I reinstate you in the department, over the acting chief's order!" cried Mr. Holden. "Go on in, and tell him what I've said, if you meet him."

"Whoop!" vented Tom Darrell, and made a break for the door through which Dr. Douglass had led the firemen.

Fred and Dave followed, Mr. Holden bringing up the rear more slowly.

"Hold on, boys!" called the Village President, suddenly. "Here they are, coming out."

A group of firemen appeared, leading three of the demented inmates whom they had found inside.

But the last comers among the firemen were bringing George Byron, his face white with pain and his teeth hard set.

"George had a beam fall on his ankle," explained one of the men, quickly. "We're without a chief."

"Here's Mr. Holden!" cried several of the men. "Tell us who'll lead us, Mr. Holden."

It was a moment for quick action.

Holden's eyes roved around over the perspiring, grimy group.

Many a heart beat fast at that instant.

Then suddenly the Village President's eyes turned in another direction.

"Fred Hope, I appoint you acting chief of the fire department! I believe you'll distinguish yourself, too. Take command!"

Fred flashed a single grateful look at Mr. Holden.

Then he leaped forward.

"Where's Dr. Douglass?" he called.

The firemen looked blank.

"Was he left behind?" quivered Fred.

"He may have been," answered several voices.

"Follow me, Volunteer One! We've got to find out."

Fred dashed into the building, followed, first, by his own immediate friends.

"Well?" roared Mr. Holden, indignantly. "Don't you men follow your chief?"

The fire crew leaped forward almost as one man under *that rebuke.*

Just inside the doorway Fred stood waiting, his pale face lighted up by the splashes of flame that leaped out from the nearest timbers.

"You can get upstairs yet, I think," he called out. "The fire has caught downstairs, but you ought to be safe for at least five minutes. Scatter through every room upstairs. Don't stop the search until you have to unless you hear the recall. Hustle!"

With that our hero himself plunged ahead up the stairs, into the thick smoke that choked.

All of the rooms up here had been filled with smoke, but now the flames were gaining the mastery over the thick clouds.

There was light enough, now, and heat—such fearful heat!

All of the boys had gotten upstairs in advance of the men of the department.

Phin was there for one.

He heard the swift announcement of Fred's elevation to the position and was furious.

"What did that fool Holden want to do that for?" he raged. "Fred Hope chief? Huh! He'd better not give me any orders!"

For fear that might happen, and cause trouble, Phin, though he did not desert his post, but helped to search the rooms upstairs, devoted even more attention to keeping out of our hero's way.

There was a net-work of rooms on the second story of the asylum, and many of them had iron-barred windows, intended to prevent the escape of lunatics.

Now, in the fire, these rooms were equally certain to offer no escape to a fireman who might find himself hemmed in by the flames.

It is the simplest thing in the world for a hemmed in fireman, if he be as sturdy and brave as he ought to be, to leap through a second-story window.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred he will land on the ground, jarred perhaps, but not injured.

Phin stepped into one room where the flames were just beginning to crackle up through the floor from below.

"This is a mighty ticklish place," he muttered, as he stepped in. "I'll look under the bed and in the closet, and then I'll get out mighty quick."

He had looked under the bed, and was turning away from the closet, in which he had found only some clothing, when he heard a quick step in the room.

He wheeled about, coming face to face with Acting Chief Fred Hope.

"Better get out of here soon, Holmes," hailed Fred. "This isn't going to be safe much longer."

"Aw, you dry up!" glared Phin.

The two boys halted, facing each other at arm's length.

Fred's face was set, but he was not ugly.

Instead, he was trying to control himself, that he might not abuse the authority given him for this night.



"Why can't you be manly, Phin Holmes?" demanded Fred, shortly. "I know you're sore against me, but I'm not carrying personal feeling into this serious business."

"Personal feeling?" grunted Phin. "I can tell you, Fred Hope, that I'm chock-full of it!"

"I'm afraid you are," answered Fred, simply, and was turning to go, for duty still called imperiously.

But Phin, his eyes blazing and his face white and twitching, bounded in front of the acting chief.

"Fred Hope, you thumped me! You turned the fellows against me, and——"

"I didn't," Fred denied, coolly.

"You lie!"

For just an instant Fred's fist clenched and raised. Then he let it fall to his side again.

"And you're trying your best to cut me out with Nellie Thurman!" choked up the broker's son.

"No one but yourself can do that, Phin," Fred returned, in a voice of unnatural calm.

"You lie again. You're trying to spoil my whole life. It's time for me to put you out of my way—and I'll do that!"

With a swift, fiendish, furious energy, Phin bent forward.

With both hands he pushed Fred Hope through a hole in the floor, where the flames now surged up.

With a cry of terror Fred Hope shot through the rotten, burning, crackling flooring—down into the fiery pit below!

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE BATTLE OF HIS LIFE.

As he fell, Fred Hope righted himself.

He came down, landing on his feet between two sheets of blazing, leaping flame, his hair singed and his skin scorched.

Only the swiftest leap away saved the young chief from the peril of having his clothing catch in the flames, and he clapped a handkerchief over his nostrils to prevent himself breathing in the fire.

For just an instant, Phin, now really overcome by horror at what he had done, stood peering down into the live furnace beneath.

"Great! That's the way to use 'em!" chuckled a crazy voice behind him.

Ere Phin Holmes had time to dodge or turn, a powerful lunatic wound his arms around the sneak from behind.

Up into the air shot Phin's body, then was hurled heavily down through the same hole that he had pushed Fred Hope.

Fred saw nothing of it, but heard the thud of Phin's body striking on the floor behind him.

Like a flash our hero wheeled about, just as he was going to save himself.

With flame everywhere, there was light enough for him to recognize his enemy in the smoke.

"Help! help!" shrieked Phin, wildly.

He lay there with a broken leg, and his clothing was rapidly catching.

With ne'er a thought of a mean act, but stirred only by the brave and generous impulses of a true fireman, Fred darted back.

He caught up Phin and bore him away, at the top of his speed.

"Oh, you're murdering me!" shrieked Phin, for Fred had no time to secure the gentlest hold, and so Phin's broken leg caused him the keenest agony.

Out of the room, through a door, and into a hallway rushed Fred.

Then an open outer door stood before him.

Through this doorway Fred bore his enemy, out on to the porch.

It was as hot here as in a furnace, though the actual flame had not yet reached here.

"Here, quick, some of you people!" bawled Fred, lustily, as he deposited Phin on the porch as gently as he could.

A half-dozen of the more adventurous spectators sprang forward, busying themselves with putting out the flames on Phin's clothing.

As for Fred, he attended to himself.

Throwing himself on the ground, he rolled over and over.

He quickly had the fire in his clothing extinguished.

Then our hero got upon his feet, a trifle stiff, for some of his burns had been painful.

Just at this instant the spectators came past, bearing the screaming Holmes youth.

"Listen!" screamed Phin. "Fred Hope kicked me through the flooring from above! This is all his doing!"

Fred staggered back, aghast.

"Phin, you can't be as wicked as that!" he gasped. "I did nothing of the kind!"

"If I die, you're my murderer!" shrieked Phin. "I accuse you now!"

Fred's face betrayed all the horror that he felt at this fearful, wicked, lying accusation.

Chief Watson stepped quickly forward.

"I deny his awful charge. Am I under arrest, sir?" Fred asked, in a shocked whisper.

"I can't arrest the fire chief when he's on duty," replied Watson, gravely.

Mr. Holden stood close by.

To him Fred turned swiftly.

"You've heard the charge, sir? I am innocent. Do you relieve me from command?"

Mr. Holden hesitated.

"Not yet," he said, slowly. "I can't say that I believe it. There may be, ought to be, must be, some mistake."

"Hope is still the fire chief, then?" asked Police Chief Watson, looking keenly at the Village President.

"Yes—until after the fire."

Fred had still his duties to attend to, then.

He waited to hear no more, but ran to one of the young doctors who stood nearby.

"Are all the inmates out?" he asked.

"All but one—a big, powerful man."

"And Dr. Douglass?"



"Haven't you heard? He was brought out just before you came."

"Brought out?"

"Yes; dying, I'm afraid."

"Poor fellow," murmured Fred. "But you say there's one inmate in there yet?"

"One, the most powerful of all, we believe."

Fred glanced at the building.

It was now a consuming furnace.

"I can't keep my men in there any longer!" he quivered.

Raising his trumpet, clearing his throat, he sounded the recall, bellowing at his loudest.

From the many doors the members of Volunteer One poured through.

Then Fred leaped forward.

The young doctor, a puny-looking fellow, leaped after him.

"Where are you going, chief?"

"In there myself!"

"It's to your death!"

"A true chance for a fire chief to take!" called back Fred Hope, over his shoulder.

Then, while the onlookers gasped, Fred's youthful figure was seen shooting through the red splotches of fire.

He was inside, and a shudder seized the crowd.

But Fred had gone in there animated by no sense of heroics.

There was still a life to be saved—and, at that, a man with a helpless mind—a poor, demented unfortunate.

There was little use in searching on the ground floor.

Fred shot up the stairs that threatened to give way under him.

Of a sudden the remembrance of Phin's mishap flashed upon him.

"Holmes may have been chucked through by that same powerful lunatic!" shot into the young chief's mind. "I'll look in that part of the building first of all."

It was the most dangerous part of the building to be in, situated in the very center of the hot work of destruction.

As a matter of caution Fred held a handkerchief over his mouth to keep out as much of the smoke as possible.

He reached the door of the very room from which Phin had hurled him below.

There was no one here.

Just before Fred turned he heard a harsh, leering chuckle behind him.

Wheeling, Fred was just in time to see the big fellow aiming a blow at him.

Fred's only chance was to drop to his knees.

The blow passed over him, but the lunatic, in trying to recover himself, gave Fred a fearful kick in the breast.

Fred staggered up. The lunatic leaped up.

The two stood facing each other, both wary.

"Come with me," grinned the crazy man. "Into the flames! Oh, it will be glorious!"

"Will you let me show you the right way to the flames, then?" panted Fred Hope.

He was wondering if he could not, in this way, lure the maniac along to a place from which help could be summoned for the rescue.

"Let you lead?" leered the big fellow. "Of course not! What do you know about jumping into the flames?"

"Come," coaxed Fred.

"No, no! Back into that room! That's the place! There's the real fiery pit!"

"No, no! Let me show you a better place," coaxed Fred. "And we haven't much time to lose, either—for the fire will be out mighty soon!"

For an instant the maniac regarded Fred with a good deal of interest.

Then, with a sudden roar of laughter he leaped forward upon the boy.

Fred dodged once, but the lunatic, as quick as the young chief, wheeled upon him and wound his arms around him.

Fred was forced to fight back now—forced to fight for his very life!

Together they locked, and swayed, battling stubbornly.

He was, indeed, a powerful fellow—that maniac.

Fred soon realized that mere strength would avail him nothing now.

If he depended upon that, our hero knew that nothing could save him from death in the "fiery pit" of this lunatic's frenzied fancy.

Yet, wrapped in that crushing clutch, Fred fought as best he could, trying to use his knees as they rolled over.

And, at last, Fred got in a good jab with one of his knees, straight against the other's wind.

The big fellow lay there, gasping.

Fred jolted him again with that knee, in the same place, and the strong arms relaxed their clutch ever so little.

With his strongest wrench, Fred wriggled out of the clutch.

But he knew that this lunatic would soon have his wind again and become as dangerous as ever.

It seemed a fearful thing to do, but there was no help for it.

Fred leaned swiftly forward, striking the maniac his hardest blow squarely between the eyes.

"That's the only thing to do!" hailed a choking voice behind.

Fred turned to behold the same young doctor who had told him that there was still one inmate left in the building.

"I had to do it," panted Fred.

"Of course you did. I saw that."

"Now, help me to drag him out," appealed Fred.

"I'll do the best I can," coughed the young doctor.

He was a puny little fellow, but game and gritty as they come.

This little fellow seized the maniac's feet.

Fred got a strong hold under the fellow's shoulders.



So they fought their way through the smoke-filled corridor.

Nearly strangled, all but overcome by the fumes, they wondered if they could get their heavy burden down the stairs?

For that matter, would the stairs hold?

"There's only one chance," breathed Fred. "Slide him to the head of the stairs, feet first. Then we'll get ahead and drag him down. He ought to slide easily."

"But if the stairs give way——?"

"We'll go through wherever our man does," Fred retorted, grimly.

Swiftly they worked, and got their charge in position.

Then, each seizing the insensible lunatic by one foot, they dragged him down those hot, trembling stairs.

The fellow came, swiftly enough, but they had to use great care not to bump the poor unfortunate's head heavily against the edges of the steps.

But at last they got him down.

Then Fred darted to the doorway, which was threatening to totter.

"Volunteer One!" he bawled. "Two good men to bring someone out!"

Fred stood there swaying, until he saw four or five firemen leap forward, pick up the body, and carry the troublesome lunatic outside.

Then our hero pitched forward.

He kept from falling until he was clear of the building.

Then Tom Darrell jumped forward and caught him.

All that ailed Fred was that his lungs were so full of the smoke that he could no longer breathe.

His face was beginning to blacken, in fact, though that detail escaped the on-lookers on account of the grime and soot that streaked the face of the young acting chief.

"Pump-handle him gently," commanded Tom Darrell. "Start some air into his lungs. But don't be rough!"

Crash! The main part of the asylum building now crashed down, sending up a volume of sparks.

But the building had been doomed from the outset.

The last living being had been gotten out of there—that was all that counted.

After five minutes Fred began to breathe more easily.

His lungs were still sore, though, and his body smarted in many places where he had been burned in trying to save Phin Holmes.

But now hurried up Billy Gray, honest and earnest, but bungling as usual.

"Heard the news, Fred?" he challenged, eagerly.

"The news? What is it, Billy?" came, weakly, from Acting Chief Hope.

"Shut up, you idiot," said Tom Darrell, in Billy's ear.

But too late. The news came bursting from Billy's lips:

"Phin Holmes is dying fast from his burns!"

"Phin Holmes dying?" shot through Fred's dizzy, tortured brain. "Then that accusation of his against me will prove the most damaging kind of evidence. It's murder that I'll be charged with!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### CONCLUSION.

Fred went so white, and staggered so blindly, that he seemed on the verge of dying himself.

"You blamed little idiot," glowered Tom, savagely, as he seized Billy by the shoulders and wheeled him around, "get out of here!"

Billy Gray retreated a few yards, then stood wondering what he had done.

"So, after being accused of theft that I didn't commit, I must now answer to a charge of murder that I'm not guilty of!" throbbed Fred.

It was his mother that he thought of, more than himself. And Nellie Thurman? What would she think. Would she again believe wholly in his innocence.

"Where is Phin?" he asked, weakly.

"Over in one of the tents they used for outdoor patients," replied Tom.

"I think I'd better get over there and see him, if they'll let me."

"Lean on me, then," urged Tom, while Dave Freeman sprang to the other side of the weakened young chief.

In the meantime other things were happening in other tents in this little group of white canvas houses under the tall trees.

In one of the tents, on a cot, and held safely in a strait-jacket, lay the violent lunatic whom Fred had rescued at such a fearful risk to himself.

Nearby, looking on, stood a man whose face was convulsed by sympathy.

In the doorway of the tent stood Mr. Thurman, looking quietly on.

Presently the sympathetic one by the cot turned and saw the old banker.

They appeared to know each other, for Mr. Thurman nodded and said:

"Your brother is all right now, Allison."

"Thank heaven, yes!" responded Mr. Allison, sighing and stepping out of the tent.

"And thanks, also to that brave young fellow, Fred Hope," suggested Mr. Thurman, mildly.

"Oh, I'm going to thank him," returned Allison, earnestly, as he and the banker walked slowly away.

"How?" queried Mr. Thurman.

"By the voice of the thing that talks loudest in this queer old world of ours!" cried young Allison, earnestly.

"Money?"

"Of course."

"Too bad for you, then," murmured the banker.

"What are you talking about, Mr. Thurman?"

"Why, Fred Hope won't take a cent of reward for anything that he has done in the line of duty."

"He won't?"

"No, sir! It's a fixed principle with him that no real man will accept reward for doing his plain duty."



"Then I'll make him take the money!" glowed Allison.

"If you succeed," smiled Mr. Thurman, "please come to me and tell me how you worked it. Fred Hope rescued my daughter, and, with all my persuasion, I wasn't able to make him accept a single penny. You won't succeed, either."

"Won't I, though?" demanded Allison, and halted, seeming to be lost in thought.

"Good evening, Penderbury," greeted Mr. Thurman, as a man passed them.

Mr. Penderbury, who carried a green cloth bag under one arm, and walked briskly, was the leading lawyer of Wakefield.

"Anything in your line here, Penderbury?" queried the banker.

"Rather," answered the lawyer, smiling sadly. "I'm called here to draw up the will of Dr. Douglass, who is reported to be dying. So you'll excuse me, I know."

They watched the lawyer disappear into another of the tents, where the light of a lantern shone.

"Great Scott!" broke suddenly from Mr. Allison. "An idea has struck me. Mr. Thurman, I'd like to give Fred Hope at least five thousand dollars for what he has done for me here to-night."

"I'd like to give him as much, but we can't either one of us have our way."

"Let us see if we can't. Come along. You'd really give Hope five thousand, if you could?"

"In an instant," ejaculated the banker.

They halted at the door of the tent where Dr. Douglass lay dying.

"It's a simple will, Penderbury," they heard the dying physician say. "Just leave everything to my sister, Alice."

"May we come in?" asked Allison, softly.

"Yes," whispered the dying man.

"You'll both do for witnesses to the will," nodded Penderbury.

"Dr. Douglass," murmured Allison, as he leaned over the dying man, "while you're making your will, you can do us the greatest possible favor. Mr. Thurman and myself both wish to give Fred Hope five thousand dollars, but Hope, I understand, has foolishly proud notions, and won't take money for doing his duty."

"He ought to be well rewarded," said the dying man, weakly.

"Just so, and you can help us, doctor."

"How?"

"Where do you keep your money—what national bank?"

"The Wakefield National Bank."

"Then, in your will, Dr. Douglass, have a paragraph inserted that you direct the payment to Hope, out of your deposit in the Wakefield National, of the sum of ten thousand dollars. And direct your executor to pay the amount at once."

"But I haven't ten thousand there."

"Where's your bank pass-book?"

"In the satchel under the cot."

"Let us take the pass-book, then, doctor, and the first thing in the morning Mr. Thurman and I will deposit ten thousand dollars to your account. Then we'll turn the book back to Mr. Penderbury. Will you do this for us, doctor?"

"I—I'd be only too glad to," murmured the dying man, weakly.

"Good enough! Then you'll put the clause in the will, Mr. Penderbury?"

"Certainly, since Dr. Douglass wishes it."

"Good enough! And now, call us when you wish us to witness the will. We'll be at hand."

These two beneficent plotters again stepped forth into the night.

But, from another nearby tent, they heard Phin Holmes screaming:

So the two entered the tent where Phin, swathed in bandages, lay tossing in pain.

"Oh, Mr. Thurman," screamed Phin, "this doctor tells me I've got to die!"

"Let us hope it isn't true, my lad," replied the banker. "But, if it proves to be true, you'll die in brave and manly fashion, won't you?"

"But I can't die! I—I—oh, what a liar and sneak I've been!" sobbed the suffering boy.

"Is there anything on your mind, Phin, that you'd like to say?" asked the old man, gravely. "Any lie that you feel will be on your soul if you don't right it."

"Yes!" shrieked the terrified boy. "Oh, yes!"

"Tell me all about it, then," urged Mr. Thurman, kneeling beside the cot.

"Fred Hope didn't push me into the fire to-night," shuddered the youngster.

"I didn't suppose that he did," replied Mr. Thurman, quietly. "So that was all a lie on your part?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Why did you tell such a lie?"

"Because I hated Fred Hope."

"What did happen, then?"

"Oh, I—I pushed him through a burning hole in the floor, but he saved himself after falling to the floor below."

"How did you come to be hurt, then?"

"A big lunatic seized me and hurled me after Hope."

"And then——? Tell the whole truth, Phin."

"Then——Fred Hope brought me out of the building."

"He saved you where you had tried to destroy him, eh?"

"Yes, oh, yes! It was fearfully wicked, wasn't it?"

"Very," replied Mr. Thurman, quietly. "But you're doing all you can to right the sin by telling me now."

"And there's something else," sobbed Phin.

"Tell me, then," urged the old man.

"Fred Hope didn't steal that wallet at the mill."

"Do you know who did?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I did! Oh, oh!"

"You stole the wallet, Phin? Why?"



"Because I hoped it would be found on Fred Hope and get him into a lot of trouble."

"How did it get into Fred's pocket?"

"I saw the wallet lying on the desk. I opened it and saw the money. Then I saw Hope standing in the doorway, his back turned to me. I slipped up beside him, and—and, oh, the rest was easy!"

Mr. Thurman's eyes gleamed, but he asked, very quietly:

"Is there anything else that you wish to say, Phin?"

"No, no; Nothing."

Mr. Thurman rose slowly.

"Are you going to leave me?" asked the tormented boy.

"Yes. I must find Fred Hope at once, and tell him about these confessions."

As he turned, the old banker glanced keenly at Allison.

The latter nodded in token that he had heard all of the confessions.

Then the two passed out of the tent.

As they did so, they came face to face with Acting Chief Fred Hope, who stood flanked by Tom, Dave, Mickey and Billy Gray.

"I heard it all," whispered Fred, nodding.

"Hope, I can't tell you how glad, for your sake, I am that all of this is cleared up."

"Hardly more glad than I am, Mr. Thurman."

"But I didn't believe either charge against you, Fred Hope. Nor would I believe any other charge of dastardly conduct on your part. But you are willing to go in and see Phin?"

"If he wants me to."

"He may want to ask your forgiveness."

"If he is dying, my forgiveness is his without his asking."

"Wait. I'll find out whether he wants to see you."

Phin did.

Fred passed inside, alone. He and Phin had considerable of a talk.

In the meantime, Messrs. Thurman and Allison returned to the tent where Dr. Douglass's will was being drawn up.

They were just about in time to sign as witnesses.

Two hours after Dr. Douglass had signed his last will and testament he lay at peace.

He had given up his life in the protection of the insane patients left in his care.

Not one of them had perished.

In the morning Fred Hope had a staggering surprise.

Lawyer Penderbury waited on him and informed him that, under the terms of Dr. Douglass's will, he had fallen heir to ten thousand dollars.

"But I can't think of taking it," protested our hero. "It's absurd. Besides, the money should go to the rightful heirs."

"You're one of them," smiled the lawyer.

"But I don't want to take that money."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," retorted the lawyer. "If you don't, the State will get the money. Now, don't be

foolish, Hope. Since the money has been left to you, take it and make the best use you can of it."

To this day the young man does not suspect how he actually came to get the money.

Phin Holmes did not die. Contrary to the expectation of the doctors, he pulled through.

His father, feeling wholly disgraced by his son's conduct, managed to get the young man out of the State before any criminal prosecutions were started against Phin.

The Holmeses are now living somewhere Out West.

No one in Wakefield cares much where they are.

At the next meeting of the Board of Village Trustees something most surprising happened.

Chief Watson, feeling that he would never come into full strength again, sent in his resignation.

Within five minutes the Board had elected Fred Hope as regular chief of the Wakefield Fire Department.

George Byron resigned, sooner than serve under our hero.

At first a man assistant was appointed.

But, in time, the position fell to Tom Darrell.

Both young men still retain their positions in the Wakefield Fire Department.

Both Fred and Tom have now crossed the twenty-one-year boundary of manhood.

Yet neither discredits the splendid work that can be done by boy firemen of the right stamp.

Ever since Fred became chief, in fact, the fire department of Wakefield has been more than half manned by boys.

There are two fire crews in Wakefield, now, each with its own engine and truck.

Dave Freeman is captain of one crew, and Mickey Flynn of the other.

Fred was not long in engaging in business with his bequest.

He has succeeded from the outset.

In other directions he has succeeded too, past all his early dreams. For the banker's daughter now signs herself:

"Nellie Thurman-Hope."

## THE END.

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